

May 31, 2017

Planning Board and City Council  
City of Newburyport, Massachusetts  
*by email*

Memo: Urban Design Critique of Waterfront West

Dear members of the Newburyport Planning Board and City Council:

As requested, and in anticipation of our meeting on June 5, I respectfully submit this memo reviewing plans for Waterfront West in downtown Newburyport. I am a certified city planner in practice since 1993, and the author of three books on urban issues, including *Walkable City*, published in 2012. My recent local work includes a downtown master plan for Lowell, MA, completed in 2010. I have enjoyed visiting Newburyport on many occasions, and I have also featured its downtown in my lectures for several decades. As of today, I have reviewed 15 distinct documents sent to me by the City and the developer, New England Properties, over the past weeks.

It is necessary to begin this critique with a few notes. The first is that it is a critique: it intends to look for flaws in the current design proposal, so that it can be improved. This proposal has many positive qualities, but I will focus on its challenges.

The second is that this is an urban design critique: it is not focused so much on planning as it is on design. For example, it is not concerned with to what degree the proposal satisfies the requirements of the *Waterfront Mixed Use District* or the *Waterfront West Overlay District*, nor the extent of its adherence to the City's 2003 *Waterfront Strategic Plan* or 2017 citywide *Master Plan*. Those questions can be ably addressed by City staff. Rather, this effort focuses on the qualities of the proposal that are likely to make it more or less successful from a design perspective: will it function as intended, given its organizational, spatial, and architectural qualities?

Before moving to critique, however, I do want to take a moment to commend the proposal, which is truly of high quality—even of remarkable quality—in many respects. These include its focus on connectivity to Merrimac Street and other thoroughfares to its south; its inspired and historically contextual wharf-style organization; its preservation of view corridors to the water; its nicely amenitized waterfront with continuous “riverwalk” edge; and even its novel approach to its architectural language, which attempts to be both contextual and contemporary. These features convince me that we are dealing with a development team possessing both the skill and sensibility necessary to reach an optimum outcome on this project. I have no doubt that, with the proper continued direction from the community, Newburyport can end up with a development it will be proud of.

Congratulations and encouragement is also due to Newburyport leadership and planning

staff for creating a process where large and important projects like his one can be productively critiqued and, one hopes, improved in light of larger community goals. Not many municipalities are very effective in this regard.

## **Key Urban Design Criteria**

This review is organized according to the key criteria that are relevant to improving its urban design. These are not “the” key urban design criteria, but rather are the particular criteria that seem most in need of application in this case. They are eight:

- Connectedness;
- Scale;
- Spatial Definition;
- Active Edges;
- Fronts and Backs;
- Street Trees;
- Architectural Variety; and
- Retail Viability.

Each of these will be addressed in turn in the pages ahead.

### **1. Connectedness**

As the proposal properly notes, a key goal of the design is to integrate it into the existing urban fabric along Merrimac Street and to tie it back to the heart of downtown just to its east. On Merrimac Street, the plan takes advantage of connections south along Green Street and Market Street, as it should, as well as to the new parking structure planned at the base of McKay’s Wharf. However, all three of these connections are compromised somewhat due to the qualities of existing adjacent properties, as will be discussed ahead. This puts additional pressure on the new development to make these connections as walkable as possible—also discussed ahead.

Given the parking lots to the east and west, the plan does about as well as can be expected connecting in those directions. It seems most likely that most east-west travel will occur along the riverwalk and along Merrimac Street, rather than central to the development. Unfortunately, the most important connection, east along Merrimac, is hindered by a large “missing tooth,” a gap of building edge along the parking lot east of Green Street. This gap is outside the project’s boundaries, but it is worth noting that placing a retail building in the northeast corner of that parking lot, taking up about 22 spaces, would provide a key active connection between the project site and Market Square.

### **2. Scale**

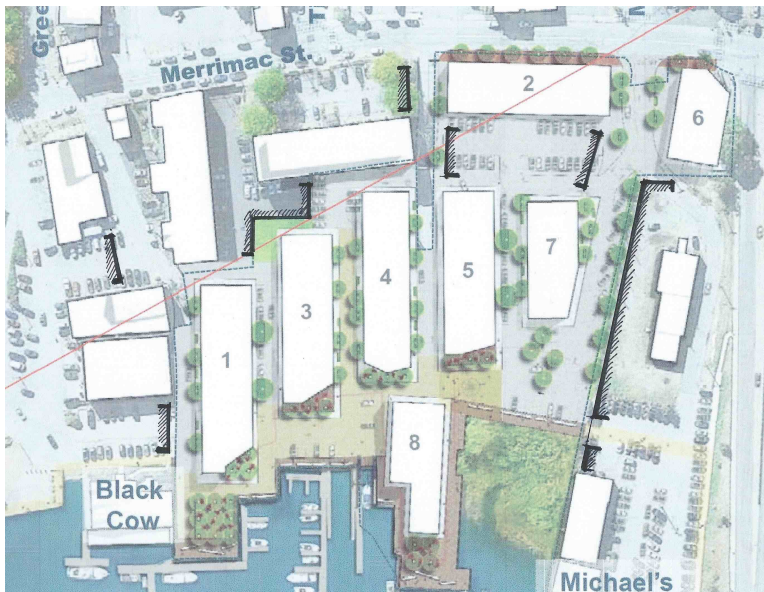
It is important that the development be compatible with the scale of downtown Newburyport. Because most of the proposal is four to five stories tall, it rises higher than most of downtown, which tends towards two- and three-story buildings, and also towards a variety of heights in proximity. There are also historic five-story loft buildings downtown, but these are an exception.

In defense of taller buildings, it bears noting that it is appropriate and common for a city to have its tallest buildings near the water's edge, where land is most valuable. Also, the downward sloping land and many preserved view corridors only make this height less impactful. Indeed, five story buildings will give more activity and spatial definition to the development's public places than would be possible with smaller buildings.

Finally, it can be said that *compatible* does not necessarily mean *the same*, and new developments that are different can also fit in. So, what would make this development fit in better? The designers have already made an attempt at this, but it would seem that the design would belong better to Newburyport if its buildings' heights were even more varied than the current plan. This variation cannot be achieved just by putting upper stories in large dormered roofs. . . actual changes in scale are needed to give this impression. While such changes would represent a decrease in project value, a few key height reductions at strategic points would do a lot to make this project more contextual.

### 3. Spatial Definition

As mentioned above, spatial definition is essential to the quality of a public place. Evolutionary biologists make it clear that all animals, humans among them, are not comfortable without a sense of having their flanks covered from attack. For this reason, people do not like to spend time in urban spaces without good edges. A plaza is only as good as its walls, and the best streets have buildings nearby on both sides of them.



*Marked in black are the street edges currently lacking spatial definition.*

One need only walk west on Merrimac Street to recognize how the pedestrian experience deteriorates rapidly west of Green Street, where the street wall disappears and buildings have been allowed to sit behind their parking lots. In addition to eroding the spatial quality of the street, these front parking lots send the message that the neighborhood

belongs to cars more than people, and the sidewalks are crossed by driveways that represent a threat to safe walking.

As noted above, the current scheme suffers from a lack of well-shaped street edges in a number of locations. Some are more problematic than others, like the central entrance alongside the unfortunate parking lot to the east (left) of the hotel (Building 2). The worst by far is the long exposed parking area to the west (right). It only makes sense to maintain a street in this location if the site to its west is expected to be redeveloped soon.

Easier to fix is the parking lot behind the hotel, which damages the experience of two of the three project entrances. At the very least, these edges should be well lined by walls and greenery, but it would be better if a plan reconfiguration were to eliminate this gap entirely.

#### 4. Active Edges

While firm edges are important to the comfort of a public space, those edges must be activated with visible uses if they are to attract pedestrians. Humans are among the social primates; nothing interests us more than other humans. When faced with a boring streetscape devoid of signs of human activity, we turn around and walk the other way. The biggest challenge to this plan in its current form is the lack of active uses along most of its north-south thoroughfares.

The cause of this problem is clear: two independent goals—avoiding floodwater and providing parking—are met with the same solution: most of the ground level of most of the buildings is given over to parking. Some relief is provided in the form of building entries on some sides of the buildings, but, instead of windows at ground level, these structures receive window-shaped screens that clearly do not hold anything behind them but cars.

It is easier to identify this problem than to provide a single solution, but many approaches are worth considering. These include the following:

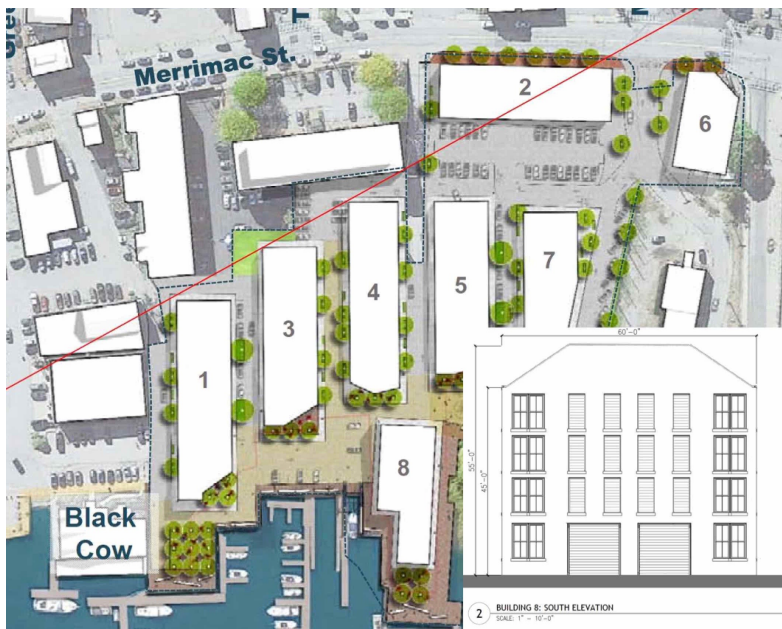
- Putting more detail and furnishings into building entries, so that they better communicate human activity. In current form, they are rather minimalist.
- Adding more public/private features, like protruding balconies, bay windows, window boxes, eaves, and open shutters on upper levels to blur the distinction between indoor and outdoor space while encouraging more communication between the apartments and the street. Worth noting is that the apartments would benefit greatly from bay windows and balconies providing water views that are now lacking.
- Providing better detailed openings along the parked edge. I am not sure what flood requirements mandate, but these could be actual windows, or at least screens that effectively imitate operable shutters.
- As already suggested in some of the developer's materials, providing green screens and other vertical vegetation along these parked building edges.
- Paying more attention to Fronts and Backs (see 5 below) and block structure, so

that street spaces without entries and other public/private features on both sides are not places of pedestrian activity.

- Elevating a portion of the ground plane—e.g. the central north-south spine—above a continuous basement of parking, so that both the habitation and the street space are out of the flood zone.

All of these measures could help, but none would be as effective as the last, which unsurprisingly would have the greatest impact on the plan and its phasing.

Of particular note in this regard is Building 8, which appears to terminate the view down the central spine with a façade that is not worthy of its key location. This façade needs reconsideration.



*The elevation shown at right is the landward face of Building 8, which terminates the central spine with garage doors and shuttered openings.*

## 5. Fronts and Backs

Good urbanism is not possible without fronts and backs, because every building has good and bad edges, and people only like to walk along the good ones. The current plan wisely divides its north-south rights-of-way into three types, and designates a distinct design for each type based on its intended use. But these designations do not clearly establish a block pattern of fronts and backs. For example, both Building 3 and Building 5 in the drawing above find the same street type along both their left and right flanks. If the plan was truly designed around fronts and backs, this would not happen.

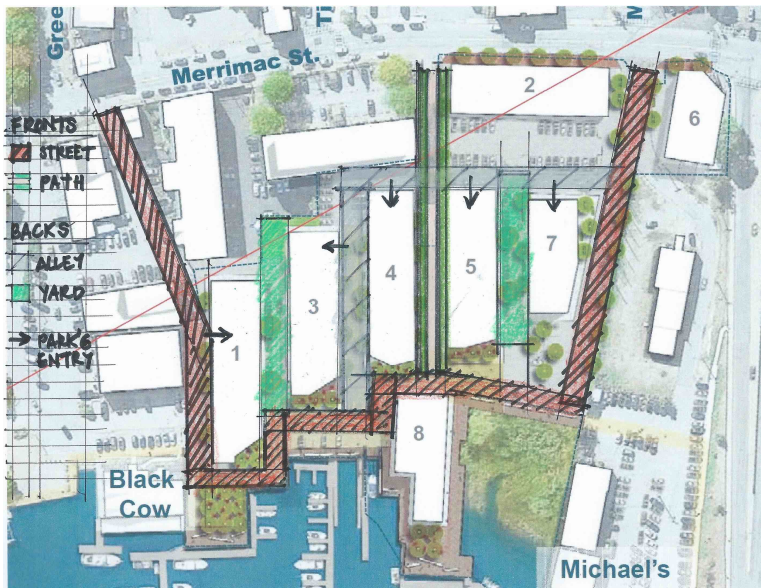
Additionally, this conception of the plan, in which each narrow building is treated like a city block, results in an excessive amount of driving infrastructure. Traditionally, most city blocks have buildings on both edges, with either rear yards or an alley at the center.



Rarely in such blocks are there also drives through the middle of each building, as happens here, to serve parking. Remarkably, the combination in this proposal of streets, alleys, and internal parking drives around and through every building results in an astounding *eleven* distinct north-south driving paths in only 500 feet of site.

This solution, in which the entire ground plane is essentially drivable, seems unnecessary. It allows fire trucks to access both sides of all buildings, something that few cities require. After all, most American buildings have rear yards, not rear drives.

An alternative proposal for the same plan imagines the site as two blocks rather than five. It allows the central spine to be pedestrian only—making it easier to elevate to first-floor level—and places only one alley between buildings, allowing the others to be turned into rear yards. Beyond its parking entry (see below), this alley may not even be needed. A plan such as this one would take pressure off the non “front” faces of the buildings, so that activity, detail, and budget could be focused in the places where people are likely to walk, drive, and otherwise spend time in the public realm.



*One possible redesign of the current plan converts three of the current drivable thoroughfares to non-driving use.*

## 6. Street Trees

In the current plan, each north-south thoroughfare receives some trees (see page 3). There does seem to be some logic to their location; each thoroughfare type has its own rules regarding tree placement. However, it is hard to see whether the main pedestrian and driving axes have been designed with a strong commitment to a key component of most great streets: a steady march of trees, spaced evenly and frequently—ideally about 30 feet on-center. This note is included to ensure that the final landscape plan provides this outcome.

## 7. Architectural Variety

Avoiding uninhabited walls along public spaces is not enough to be safe from the sort of pedestrian boredom that causes people to stay away; it is also necessary to avoid too much repetition. As Jane Jacobs noted, “Almost nobody travels willingly from sameness to sameness and repetition to repetition, even if the physical effort required is trivial.” This means that the individual buildings in the development must be different from each other. If they aren’t, then the development will feel like a project, not a place.

This concept, as simple as it is, is one that many large developments get wrong. For the sake of economy, or sometimes architectural authenticity—“I’m one architect; how can I pretend otherwise?”—multiple buildings will look the same, or just too much alike. This produces an outcome that is boring and, worse, institutional. It mitigates against the creation of places of character, because places of character are the outcome of many hands at work.

In this regard, the current plan is halfway there. While a laudable effort has been made to give each building its own character, it remains clearly *of one hand*. This approach makes it more satisfying as an architectural project, but less satisfying as a place. One has the impression of occupying a single person’s creation, rather than a neighborhood that evolved over time.<sup>1</sup>



*An inspirational image provided by the developer gives a sense of the project’s aesthetic potential.*

<sup>1</sup> There are many people, mostly architects, who would dispute this conclusion. Almost every non-architect, when presented with the choice of where to spend their time, would not. On a personal note: educated as an architect—for ten solid years—I have found it difficult to unlearn the mandate for authenticity that turns places into projects. But unlearn it we must. Ironically, in this age of mass production, if we are to make large places that feel authentic, we can’t make them authentically our own; instead, we must pretend to be many different designers with many different design approaches. And if we can’t, we must bring in other architects and split up the work, a strategy used on many recent projects.

That said, the architectural expression of the various buildings is following an approach that seems very promising. The general concept seems to be that each building is meant to resemble a 19<sup>th</sup>-century industrial loft that has been modified with additions, mostly on the roof, to serve its current purpose. Given the desire for balconies, bay windows, awnings, and other enlivening details on the facades, one can imagine the raw material of simple brick and stone lofts serving as an armature for modern additions throughout the development.

In terms of distinguishing buildings from each other, there would seem to be two options. One would be to have both the base buildings and the attachments vary from building to building. The other would be to have the base buildings all start as generic, historic-looking lofts while varying modern attachments from building to building. Either approach, a mix of the two, or some as-yet unimagined third approach is also possible. What matters is that the outcome does not feel like it has a single author.

## 8. Retail Viability

A final issue, and an important one, concerns the design of the development's retail/entertainment component. Both its conception and its design require great scrutiny.

### *Conception*

Especially as the retail landscape is impacted by on-line sales, developing shopping destinations remains a challenging proposition. Generally, to succeed, a collection of shops and restaurants of any significant size needs to meet certain criteria notably absent here, typically including roadway visibility and/or an anchor drawing shoppers.



*This rendering shows the retail spaces with considerably more openings than the actual building elevations, yet less than one finds in most successful retail.*

For smaller amounts of retail, especially café and restaurant, the criteria can be more



relaxed, and the project brief describes 6500 square feet of retail in all. But this number conflicts with the stated retail strategy, which seems to place shops and restaurants in the waterfront ends of buildings 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7, and in the entire ground floor of building 8. This amount of retail looks to be closer to 20,000 square feet.

The first need is to resolve the apparent discrepancy between number and plan. It seems likely that the plan shows more retail than is actually considered leasable, because that produces the best urban design outcome. But if that much retail is actually intended, the second need is to determine how it can succeed given its unorthodox location. If that much retail is not intended, then many of the supposed retail spaces in the plan need to be re-purposed. The next step here is to learn the developer's intentions in greater detail.

### ***Design***

If a significant amount of retail is to succeed on site, its plan should reflect current best practices in storefront design. The current buildings do not. As visible on State Street, successful storefronts are mostly glass and located at grade. Most of the storefronts in the current proposal have residential-scale punched openings with a lot of wall in between them. The project rendering, shown above, actually seems to exaggerate the amount of glass proposed in the building elevations, and even that is much less than one typically finds in contemporary retail.



*State Street gives a good example of how to design street-front commercial space.*

Additionally, the retail space in the proposal seems to be located below the flood line (presumably to be evacuated during flooding, as is allowed), but well above street level, which is a challenge for any commercial space, given ADA requirements. Locating a restaurant or café three feet above its outdoor tables is always a challenge; if this elevation is indeed built, one would think that decks and plazas of similar height by the front door would provide a better option for outdoor seating.

All in all, the commercial component of this plan seems the least cooked and the least convincing, probably because it is the least viable aspect of the project program. Since the charm and appeal of the proposal rest in large part on its active mixed-use waterfront, this part of the plan needs to be addressed with more specificity and, perhaps, realism.

This concludes my critique of the project. Again, while in need of improvement, it does seem on the whole to be a very promising proposal, and I can advocate enthusiastically that the City and the developer continue to work together to refine it further.

Sincerely yours,

Jeff Speck, AICP, CNU-A, LEED-AP, Honorary ASLA