

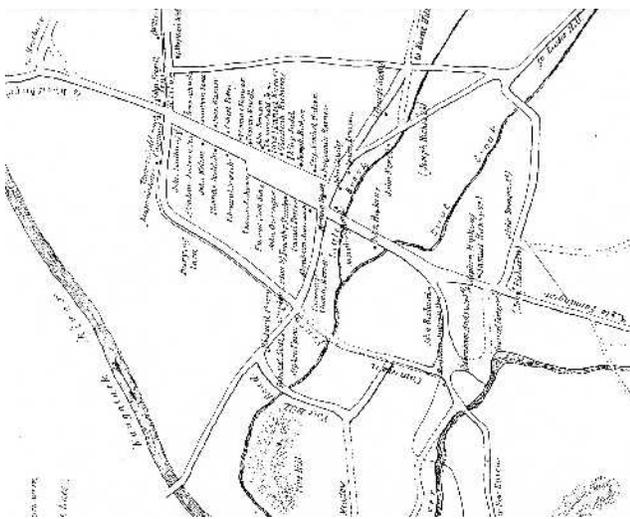
The following article was excerpted from original ISTEA funding application for publication in *Connecticut Woodlands*, a quarterly magazine of the Connecticut Forest and Parks Association (walkCT.org). Founded in 1895, the Association is the state's oldest conservation organization and was instrumental in the initial formation of the state parks and forests throughout the state, and is the steward of the 900 mile Blue Trail system. Mr. Parsons has served as a director in the Association since 1998.

Waterbury's Brass Trail: Pedestrian Networks in Urban Design

by Stephen C. Parsons, AIA

The typical urban sidewalk is a trail, part of an integral, organic walking network. At first the notion seems far fetched: the hard, cold utility of concrete in the congested city versus a natural, worn path in a serene wood. But the argument for relating the two could help provide a framework for improved planning, land use, and design in both city and country. A model for resolving this apparent dilemma is the Brass Trail, now being designed for Waterbury, Connecticut.

Waterbury is a small city located along the Naugatuck River in west-central Connecticut. It is the hub of a thirteen town region at the confluence of major regional highways and a commuter railroad, and is midway along transportation corridors linking New York and Boston. The high concentration of economic, cultural, historical and residential sites in downtown Waterbury is unique to the region.



Waterbury as a colonial settlement



Waterbury today

THE RISE AND FALL OF WATERBURY

Waterbury has a long history dating from the 1680's as a settlement at the confluence of the Naugatuck and Mad Rivers. The downtown layout is traced from the colonial pattern in its roughly radial streets around a central green and bounded by a perimeter of streets where the common pasture began. Mills were established along the rapidly flowing rivers, replacing farming. As the "Brass City" it was actually the dominant force of the world's brass industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although most of this industry is now gone, the legacy of those prosperous times is still evident. The historic commercial and government district centered on the Green was formed along classical city planning principles, with many of its

prominent buildings and parks created by design leaders of the day, including McKim Mead and White, Cass Gilbert, and the Olmstead Brothers.

Waterbury's development pattern from colonial times was based on high density land use with easy walking distances between clustered homes, businesses, and cultural activities. Land in the surrounding countryside was left to farm and forest, too hard to reach for everyday business and cultural activities. Until the 1940's, Waterbury retained much of this compact form, linked together by a network of walkable, tree-lined boulevards and intimate streets. The chief means into and across the city by the turn of the century was rail.

By 1960 though, the automotive age left its lasting impact, with elevated Interstate 84 and Route 8 highways cutting a swath around the southern and western edges of the downtown, part of an aggressive regional highway network. A postcard aerial view of the tangled new interchange of the time proudly proclaimed, "Waterbury, on the Highway to Everywhere." This popular new convenience rendered the tightly organized city useless in the face of spreading car centered suburbs and strip malls in once rural outlying areas. Why walk if you could drive? Residents, businesses, and industry began their exodus in this self-fulfilling prophecy.

Unintended blighting side effects from the new highways persist to this day. The highways sever the historical relationship of surrounding neighborhoods and display poorly developed building backs and under used industrial and railroad land. Important buildings have been removed for parking in a vain effort to duplicate suburban development patterns. The traditional, dense center was neglected and forgotten, not presented as intended from the new highway "Main Street." Unappealing transitional uses and vacant land once in the background to the downtown are now in the forefront when viewed from the highway. Visitors driving in from highway exits are easily disoriented. By the time they do find the downtown, they do not perceive easy walking connections between parking and their final destinations. The city's historic assets are hard to find and experience. A first and lasting impression of the whole is negative as the importance of the traditional center declines.

THE CREATION OF AN URBAN DESIGN INITIATIVE

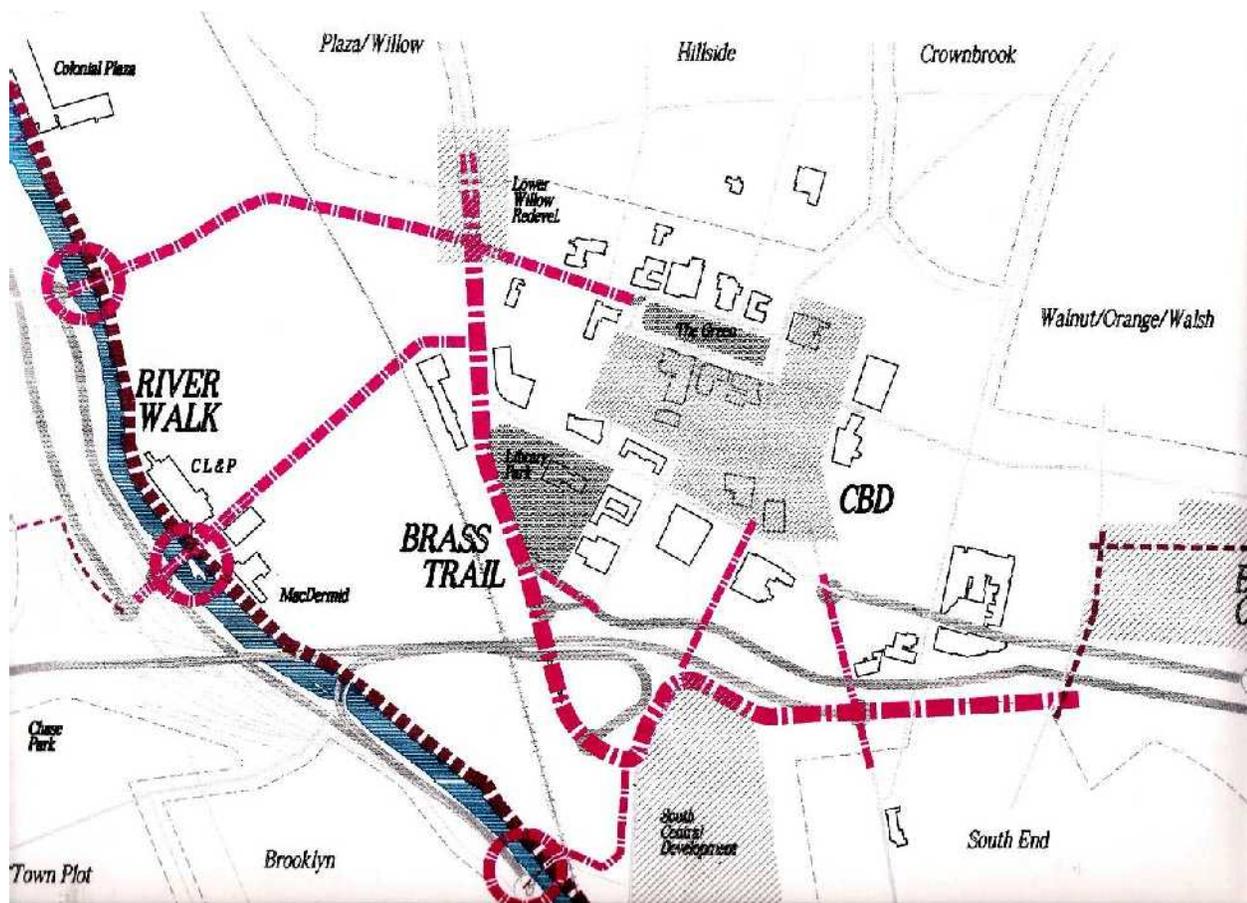
I came to Waterbury in 1990 with the viewpoint of an urban designer. Over the course of several years, I observed its visual and functional problems and potentials, and began to explore ideas that would help realistically pull it back together. The American Institute of Architects lists several important goals for an urban design process in any city:

- represents an effective community process,
- reflects and encourages a celebration of urban life,
- should not be an isolated individual building project,
- reflects a vision of what cities could be,
- reinforces and enhances the existing community fabric,
- benefits the entire population of a neighborhood, city, or region,
- encourages and reflects the highest standards of design, and
- creates and encourages a sense of place.

Starting in 1993, working with Community Visions for Waterbury, a volunteer citywide improvement group, I helped introduce ways to enhance the visual impact Waterbury makes to the outside world as one enters the city. Strategies for improving these points of introduction, termed "gateways", were explored. Later that year, a visiting team of architects and planners (a RUDAT: Regional Urban Design Action Team) studied the city. Their report reinforced the need to improve gateway elements:

"The positive image of Waterbury provided by its historic skyline and neighborhoods on the hills is matted by the proliferation of ugly billboards competing for attention, abandoned old mills, 'catch all' irregular lots left over from the highway construction and neglected waterways. The city must take a thorough inventory of the 'first impression' elements, good and bad, and work toward accentuating the positive by eliminating the negative. Streets between the downtown and the major neighborhoods must pass beneath the elevated highways, which are visual and physical barriers between the neighborhoods and downtown. Special street design features along the transition areas of these entrance ways would help to give identity and pride in both directions: as entrances into the downtown and portals back into the neighborhoods."

The idea of a pedestrian network began to emerge as a framework for downtown image improvements. Christened the Brass Trail, this network would be the linkage between the neighborhoods and the historic downtown and provide a way to reintegrate now barren highway lands with the fabric of the downtown. Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) enhancement funds were identified as a source of funding. I was asked by the Waterbury Foundation in cooperation with the City of Waterbury to create the design framework, and compile an application for ISTEA funding for its detailed design and implementation. In April 1995 the state awarded \$1.4 million to Waterbury for design and construction of the Brass Trail Southern Gateways (Interstate 84 exits 21 & 22 and streets northward to the downtown). Planned western sections linking exits from Route 8 would be funded in later phases.

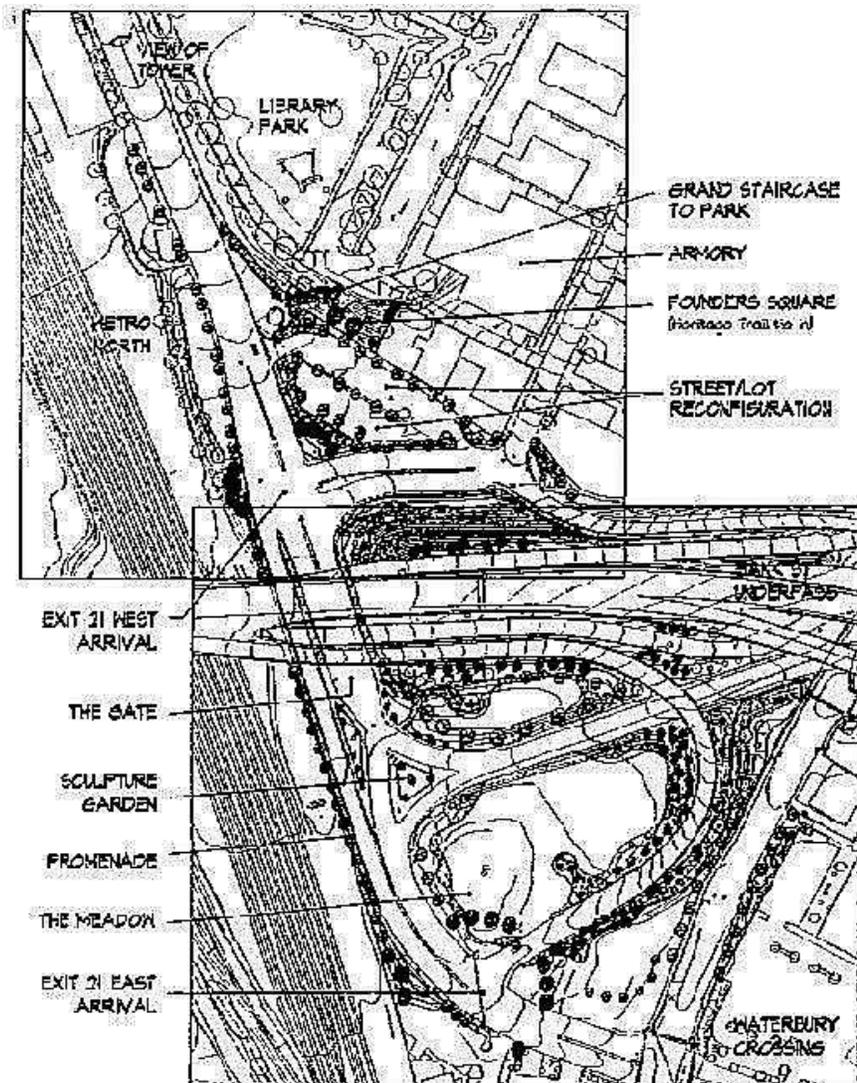


Concept Diagram of the network of streets that serve as gateway corridors to downtown Waterbury will be the primary focus for enhancement measures. Key improvements will be made in the "no man's land" that these corridors cross.

DESIGN FOR THE BRASS TRAIL

The intention of the Brass Trail is to transform the unappealing area created by the highways into an inviting, scenic walking environment, in keeping with the traditional city immediately to the north and east. In the language of ISTEA, a revitalized pedestrian network in Central Waterbury would be a connecting link of the region's intermodal transportation system. As the focus of interconnected pedestrian, vehicular, and mass transit networks, it would enhance the scenic character of the area and heighten the traveler's enjoyment in using these networks. The Brass Trail will be highly visible and accessible to people of the region and beyond.

A traveler approaching destinations in downtown Waterbury by limited access highway or rail can only enter the city streets at specific "gateway" corridors: South Main, Meadow, Freight, and West Main. The Brass Trail will unify these as entrances with appealing natural landscape plantings at interchanges, consistent welcoming and directional signage, strong formal street tree plantings, and wide sidewalks along streets leading into downtown. People will want to park, get out of their cars, and walk.



Site Plan, Phase 1 Improvements for Meadow Street, serving as a gateway corridor from 1-84 exit 21 northward to Grand Street. Beginning at the highway interchange to the south, the design introduces naturalistic plantings, outdoor sculpture, and welcome signage. A sequence is created that points traffic northward focusing on the landmark McKim Mead and White Union Station tower. The street will be reinforced as a tree-lined promenade with widened sidewalks. The new sequence includes a new plaza with cascading staircase leading to the Olmstead designed Library Park.

In the past, visual orientation was frequently established on the public ways in downtown Waterbury. Each street formed an axis with a framed view of a building or monument at its end. Wide tree-lined boulevards

often linked important public open spaces. The Brass Trail is to continue this tradition in the transitional area between the downtown and the highways. Important landscape areas such as the Green and Library Park are now seen in isolation. Sidewalk pedestrian corridors will link them to landscaped areas along the interstate highways and the Naugatuck River. Seating, planting beds and view areas will be placed along the way. With increased walking appeal, the entire green space network will be used and the assets of the city better appreciated.

The Brass Trail also links important civic projects in the immediate area, including improvements slated for the Metro North train station on Meadow Street, the rehabilitation of the Armory on Library Park, a new regional courthouse on Grand Street, and the new magnet school on South Main Street. The project vision is setting a higher standard for redevelopment initiatives to be linked more strongly to the downtown, with more emphasis on pedestrians and green space. Developers have been required to participate in the creation of pedestrian and landscape features to make the walk more pleasant and to tie their programs into the existing fabric of the city.

CONCLUSION: THE PATH TO A BETTER REGIONAL BALANCE

A growing trend in Connecticut has been for suburban and rural towns to reject development outright in order to preserve once plentiful natural open spaces for public enjoyment. Ironically, traditional population centers like Waterbury are desperate to draw development into an underused and blighted urban landscape. A key to solving the problems of both may lie in promoting new ways to make cities more inviting to new development.

Traditionally, the small cities of Connecticut were active centers for culture and commerce for a larger region. Projects like the Brass Trail seek to help reinvent urban areas to bring back their appeal, thereby taking development pressure off undeveloped rural areas in the region. Urban pedestrian networks that enhance the best historic features and integrate walks, parking, and open space, will make cities more attractive as destinations and help ensure their continued viability.