



**MERRIMACK VALLEY PLACE AND
MEANING 2020:
ESSEX COUNTY CULTURAL MAPPING
PHASE I REPORT**

Merrimack Valley Place and Meaning 2020:

Essex County Cultural Mapping Project

Summary/Report Phase I

April 2021

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Guiding Concepts	4
Implementation Design	4
Intangible & Human Assets.....	4
Tangible Assets	4
Project Theme Ideas	5
Mapping Goals	5
Who Might Use the Maps.....	5
Initial Implementation Plan	6
An Interactive Digital Map	6
An Art Map.....	7
The Pivot	7
Project Outputs and Outcomes	7
Digital Map.....	7
Expression Book	9
Survey and Book Clubs.....	10
Findings	11
Love of Place	11
Evolving and Growing Sense of Culture.....	12
Living Close But Still Apart	14
History Important Yet Non-inclusive	15
Interest in Stories and Learning.....	16
Culturally Aware Planning.....	17
Building on Partnerships.....	18
Recommendations	20

Cover Photo: Sculpture by Tom Schlosser and commissioned by Methuen High School art teacher Amy Perrault to commemorate three Methuen “city fathers”, Edward Francis Searles, Charles H. Tenney and David C. Nevins Jr. It is located in Spiggott Falls Riverwalk Park.

Introduction

This report summarizes the first phase of cultural asset mapping in Essex County – specifically work that focused on the fifteen cities and towns within the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission’s region. The report reviews the original intentions and methodology of the project, the “pivot” in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the outcomes that can be assessed at this stage of the mapping work. Lessons from this project set the stage for cultural development and planning work in the Merrimack Valley and to inform subsequent cultural mapping inclusive of the remaining 19 municipalities in Essex County.

Based on data collected, seven key findings detailed herein address different relationships to place, cultural exchanges, history, and ways of working among key cultural and planning entities in the region. While the 15 communities differ in many ways in terms of historical development, economies, demographics, and geography, they are all rich in cultural activities and creative individuals expressing themselves in a wide variety of forms. At the same time many people in these communities tend to remain within their cultural spheres and don’t experience all the Valley has to offer.

This report concludes with five recommendations as a framework for building on the successful work from the first phase. These do not constitute a plan but a framework for devising next steps. Recommendations include:

- 1) Continue to spotlight talent in the County
- 2) Expand conversations about the diversity of the area
- 3) Build platforms for ongoing cultural and creative exchanges
- 4) Establish a platform for expanded cultural coordination – including all of Essex County
- 5) Devise a mapping process for the remainder of the County



Guiding Concepts

The initial consulting agreement (August 1, 2019), spelled out five big-picture guiding concepts or long-term goals for cultural asset mapping to guide the rationale and framework for the project. They were to:

- Build capacity for collaboration within and between Merrimack Valley communities.
- Shift power dynamics to foster equity among the diverse communities of Essex County.
- Identify a broad range of cultural assets and uncover hidden assets.
- Foster different ways of thinking about the meaning and relative proximity of cultural assets within communities and in adjacent and nearby communities.
- Open and retool thinking about the value and applicability of both tangible and intangible cultural assets within a variety of dimensions of community planning and development.

Implementation Design

In August 2019, about 50 community and cultural leaders from across the Valley convened in Haverhill. This creative and participatory planning session was co-designed and led by Marquis Victor, artist and founder of Elevated Thought, Karen Ristuben of the Creative County Initiative, and Tom Borrup with Creative Community Builders. The work of the day identified general themes in addition to intangible and tangible assets to be mapped.



Intangible & Human Assets

- Artists working in community and artists working in studios
- Events, festivals
- History, including before 1640
- Immigrants, newcomers
- Rural character
- Sense of identity
- School teachers, elders
- Stories
- Young people
- Artist studios/maker spaces
- Bridges
- Cemeteries
- City/Town Halls
- Creative businesses
- Education institutions and spaces
- Faith-based organizations and spaces
- Farms/Farmers Markets
- Food, farmers markets, restaurant diversity

Tangible Assets

- Arts/culture organizations and galleries
- Green/natural spaces, trees
- Historic sites and other places of meaning

- Informal gathering places
- Mill buildings
- Museums, heritage & history organizations
- Performing art venues
- Public parks
- Rivers, lakes, ocean, marshes
- Trails and trail systems

Project Theme Ideas

- Generations (as in multiple family generations and in production of the new)
- Inclusivity
- Creativity as connector
- The Merrimack River as connector
- Flow (as in water: culture and meaning are constantly changing)

Mapping Goals

- 1) Expand awareness of and advocacy for the value of creativity and cultures of the Valley
- 2) Find and make meaning in and between communities
- 3) Identify new interconnections, partners, collaborators to share ideas and resources
- 4) Raise visibility of individuals and organizations in the creative sector
- 5) Show places people can go to find identity, meaning and that raise questions
- 6) Stimulate the region's creative economy

Who Might Use the Maps

- Those who want to learn about and explore MV communities
- People who seek places that reflect history, creative expression, community values
- Planners, community and economic development practitioners
- Tourism/tourist planning
- Chambers of Commerce and local businesses
- Educators, students





Maps generated by teams during Haverhill workshop

Initial Implementation Plan

The “map” would take two different forms, an interactive digital map, and a crowd-sourced art map. Both forms were designed to engage people in the Valley to address the following questions:

- What gives us a sense of belonging?
- What connects us to a place?
- What makes us want to put down roots?
- What makes this place welcoming?
- What makes us curious to know more about communities across the Valley?

An Interactive Digital Map

Using an online open platform, this map would accommodate multiple users, stories, and formats entered by users and screened the administrator. MVPC will house and maintain the digital map making it available to planners, educators, and other users in the region.

Participatory activities were to be employed at various public events and involve enjoyable social experiences while encouraging participants to share stories and to identify places of meaning. Places would be noted on large format maps that doubled as game boards. Events would provide other opportunities to video record stories and plot places of meaning on the



digital map. They were scheduled in six locations during May and June 2020. By early March it was evident that these events were not going to be possible.

An Art Map

The process of creating physical art pieces representing maps – led by Marquis Victor and Elevated Thought – would include crowd sourcing through participatory activities in multiple locations across Merrimack Valley. The resulting pieces or objects would remain in public spaces in each – or in clusters – of the fifteen towns and cities.

The Pivot

After considerable investment in planning the above activities, COVID-19 derailed the plans. A series of online consultations took place among Creative County leadership, the artist, and Creative Community Builders. By early May, participatory mapping activities were re-designed around three outputs addressing several broad outcomes.

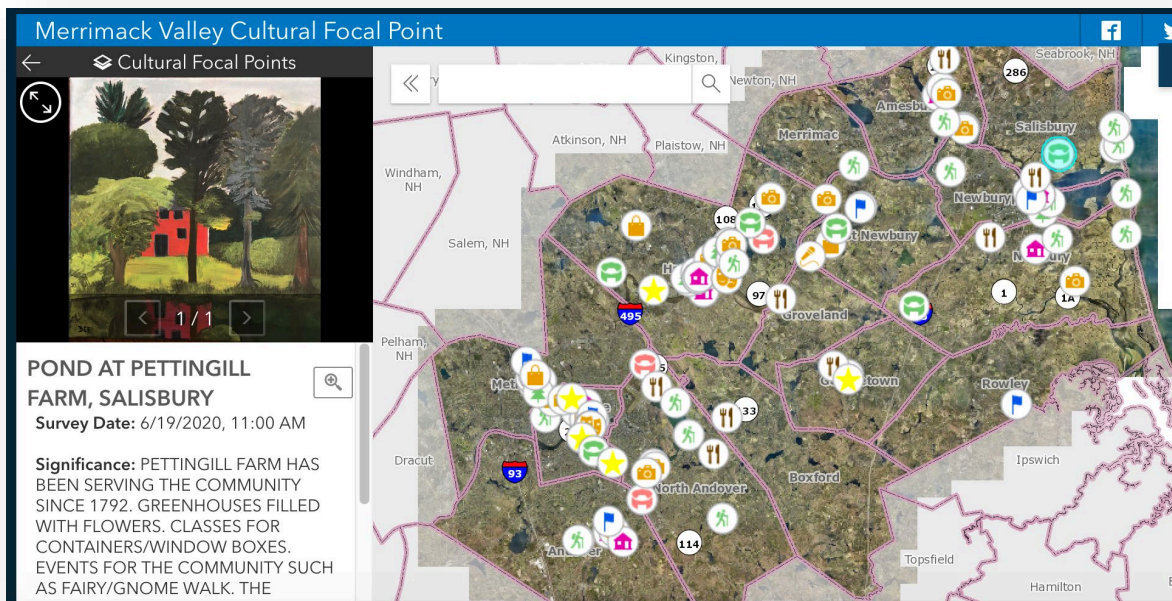
Project Outputs and Outcomes

The guiding concepts (above) proved useful and, generally speaking, the goals envisioned for the maps in August 2019 were achieved to varying degrees. The following describes the tangible outputs as well as less-intangible outcomes from the work.

Digital Map

Output: A crowd-sourced, annotated digital map of places of meaning designed, housed, and managed by MVPC, as described above. Entries were solicited widely via the network of partners, through email and social media. Response numbers were good but not as robust as hoped. The platform, however, provides an ongoing online “space” for planners and other community members to continue to contribute text, images, and map points that reflect meaningful places, events, and stories.

A total of 150 map points were submitted inclusive of each of the 15 communities in Merrimack Valley. The most map points were submitted in Haverhill, Lawrence, and Newburyport, representing 65% of all map points combined. Types of assets included: event, food, historic site, gallery, museum, music, nature, organization, park, space, stage, store, studio, and miscellaneous. Of those, the largest percentages were galleries at 16%, nature 14%, spaces 10%, and with historic sites, organizations, parks all at 8% of the total. When asked how they travel to these places, 72% of respondents indicated by car, 23% by walking, 3% using public transit, and 2% by bicycle. Planners were surprised by how many walked and by how few used bicycles.



Outcomes:

- a. Provide an ongoing planning tool
 - i. Planners in the region are provided an online, interactive base map of cultural assets to inform future planning. The map is populated with and linked to annotations about places of meaning that reflect community gathering, activities, historical events, stories, and places of special community significance.
 - ii. Others who might use the map such as tourism planners, chambers of commerce, students, and others can easily access and add to the map.
 - iii. Increased community involvement in planning, especially by the cultural sector by virtue of interacting with and providing information to MVPC.
- b. Increased awareness of and advocacy for the value of creativity and cultures of Merrimack Valley
 - i. MVPC gained new knowledge of the Merrimack Valley's cultural assets and meaning to their communities.
 - ii. MVPC now advocates for cultural asset preservation and planning across its catchment area.

Expression Book

Output: A crowd-sourced collection of stories and images reflecting meaningful places, events, and stories. These too were solicited widely as above. However, initial responses were low. Another pivot was made to directly invite three artists from each of the fifteen communities to submit images and stories for a stipend of \$250 per artist. One of the three artists was to be a young person. Networks among cultural organizations, community leaders, and other agencies were asked to identify and nominate artists. Response from young artists was not easy to attract.

There were 34 artists and writers who submitted work and each was paid \$250 for their contribution. Material was organized and the book designed by artists at Elevated Thought. It was published as a 9"x9" 84-page full color book and as a PDF for online



distribution. Several hundred copies were distributed through the partner organizations with one print run provided to schools.

Outcomes:

- An enhanced sense of shared identity among Merrimack Valley communities enabled learning about neighboring communities.
- Increased understanding and connections among leaders in Merrimack Valley, especially within the cultural sector.
- Heightened awareness of the variety of stories and meanings people find in Merrimack Valley places.
- Participating artists and writers gained sense of belonging to a growing creative network supported by cross-sector regional stakeholders.

One book club participant commented that the Expression Book should be “*Volume One in a series.*” Many similar comments were heard. Remounting the effort to produce a similar book each year is a tall and expensive order. Conditions during the COVID pandemic perhaps made such a project more viable and meaningful. Nonetheless, the appreciation and value expressed for the project’s outputs cannot be ignored.

Survey and Book Clubs

Output: Contributors to the Expression Book were asked a series of questions about their experience in the region through an online survey. Responses were relatively small in number but extensive in comments and elaborations. A series of virtual “book club” meetings after publication of the book and Cultural Focal Points Map to discuss their meaning, future purposes, and what they reveal about the cultures of Merrimack Valley. The first book club was made up of project partners and advisory group members; the second of planners convened from MVPC; the third of artist-contributors to the book.

Outcomes:

- a. Enhanced understanding of the County’s diversity and range of creative talent.
- b. Identification of key learnings drawn from the book (See Findings below).
- c. Topics for continued discussion relative to cultural assets, depth of creative talent, and meanings of place.
- d. Opportunities for local cultural planning supported by Creative County Initiative.

With completion of the above, mapping activity revealed a variety of cultural assets as well as a variety of gaps. Some gaps were related to commonly known cultural spaces or organizations that were not identified through crowd sourcing. Other gaps were related to the process, networks, and linkages in the Valley. These are described in the Findings below.

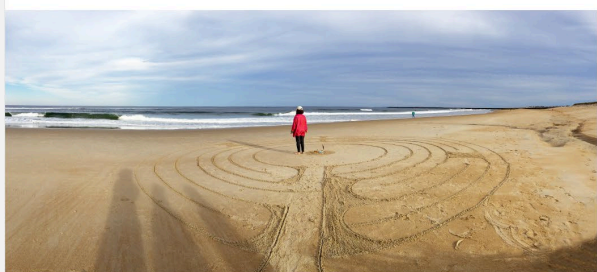


Mural by Boston artist Alexander Golob in Haverhill

Findings

Data collected include a survey of book contributors, an analysis of text and visual entries to the book, and three book club meetings, as well as other conversations with project partners and leaders. From those, the consultant distilled a series of findings offered below. It must be noted that most contributors to the book were artists living and working in the region. As individuals with keen sensibilities tuned to their surroundings, artists provide valuable insights. It must also be noted that the demographic mix of these artists were predominantly White and practice forms within the Euro-centric canons. Nonetheless, the data provide a strong indication of the meanings many people find living in the area.

One respondent to the contributor survey wrote, *"In these times of metrics and deliverables it is a pleasure to read contributors feelings."* Another wrote, *"A hundred years from now this book will still be appropriate."* A book club participant called the book, *"uplifting."* There are five community findings and two organizational findings relevant to partner organizations.



Cameron Sesto



Kathleen Gilday

Love of Place

- I. **A strong love of place was expressed, including connection to the outdoors and activities available in the area – yet attachment to place was not shared by all.**

Text analysis of the stories in the Expression Book revealed that communities across the Valley provide many experiences of meaning. References to positive *feelings* and *experiences* were found 141 times with references to *creativity* and *the handmade* 137 times. These were the top two clusters of mentions.

Survey respondents cited, *"nature and people's connection to it"* as well as *"connections with water"* as key ways they felt connected to place. They also saw a, *"consistent level of care for places and people in the areas"* and that, *"each community has a significant connection to land, place, and people."* One respondent observed a, *"loyalty to each other and the region."* Another saw, *"people sharing an experience of place, an appreciation for natural beauty, and of seasonal elements that range from sublime to severe."*

Given the relatively narrow demographics of the survey respondents, book contributors, and book club participants, it must be noted that these place attachments were expressed largely by White people and those with longer personal histories in the region. Meanwhile, respondents who are part of communities of color, and more recent arrivals (although few) expressed stronger bonds with people in their communities, expressing less connection to the geography or physical place.

It was pointed out in one book club that the idea of *universal experience* does not include everyone. One book club member said, “*Serenity is not reality for many*” warning that ideas of tranquility, “*can move people to complacency.*” They expressed a need to see more challenging content and found too much consistency in the book not reflective of the diversity in the Valley.

Other things respondents cited that added to their sense of place attachment included, food, language, and art, as well as, “*Events in places that hold special memories.*” Many acknowledged diversity of the region. One recognized, “*disparities of wealth and education but [that] everyone is aspiring to make ‘their’ lot in life, and those of their family, to be on an improvement track over time.*”

Evolving and Growing Sense of Culture

- II. **Creative people and cultural activities are plentiful in the region while the sense of what constitutes the culture and creativity is evolving.**

One survey respondent observed the entire region has, “*artists! Lots of visual artists, musicians and writers.*” One book club participant claimed that the area has a big reputation for poetry;



Photo from Elevated Thought website

another said, *“the book showed me more of what’s out there.”* While most comments were referring to artists of Western cultural traditions, another asserted there are, *“lots of very different communities and cultures...[they need to] share their home space and enjoy the nature of each other’s cultural expressions.”* One survey respondent called for, *“more diversity in art mediums represented.”*

Responding to frequent images in the book of nature and outdoor spaces, one book club participant said they, *“would like to see more urban spaces; there is beauty in urban landscape – [it] represents who we are.”* One survey respondent wrote that while the region is, *“held together by geography, there is incredible diversity...and that’s a good thing.”*

Asked what they felt missing from the book and map, one wrote, *“sports, recreational for adults and youth organized sports. Such a significant piece of culture, no matter where you go.”* There was recognition by one survey respondent that, *“young people, often, Latino bring youth and energy to an otherwise aging region.”* A book club participant said, *“[the] idea of fine art is limiting; it represents few young people’s interests.”* Another book club participant called for *“more diversity of media with a wealth of creators; [it] needs to get broader.”* One book club participant said, *“young people have a lot of talent, and like to have opportunities to showcase their talent. It seems that so much of it seems to be online with them.”*

Others pointed to, *“food – especially the hole-in-the-wall places”* as missing. Another survey respondent cited that the map was, *“missing some hugely important cultural assets,”* although did not list any.



Living Close But Still Apart

- III. **People live close but still far apart in life experiences; while some enjoy regular movement between communities, many remain in their bubbles.**

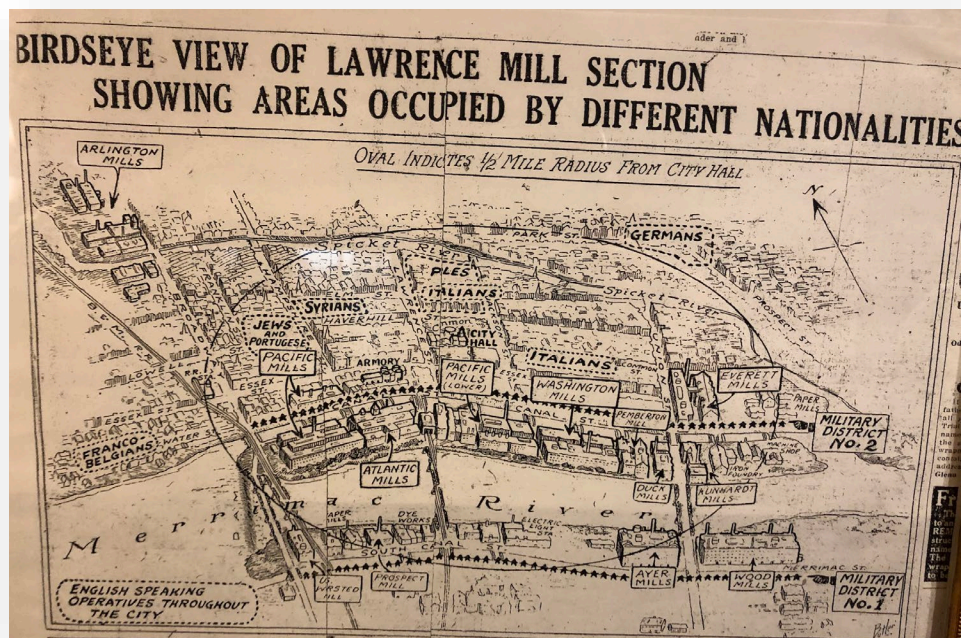
The survey asked whether people in the fifteen Merrimack Valley towns and cities share a lot in common; 62.5% answered yes and 37.5% no. However, extensive written comments by all expressed that it is not a simple either/or answer. One described, *“a lot of differences from town to town.”* Another wrote, *“Yes and no. [There are] shared experiences around events, and places like parks. Also, a lot of segregation; people don’t go to certain places and prefer to stick to their own bubbles.”* At the same time, many in book club conversations expressed strong interest in learning more and experiencing more of the different places in the Valley.



“Each town is distinct and has its own quirks,” wrote one respondent, adding, *“[there is a] big divide between urban, more diverse, young cities and rural, predominantly heterogeneous older towns.”* A book club participant said, *“most towns live within silos.”* One survey respondent opined, *“people of Lawrence and the people of Boxford exist on completely different planets.”* A survey respondent noted, *“neighborhoods right next to each other in Haverhill that consider themselves separate from one another. Distinct communities is a defining feature of the region.”* It is not uncommon in any place for there to be side-by-side communities quite distinct from one another. In one book club session, a participant observed, *“people are polarized today, but art brings people together.”*

Among the top three references in the text analysis were references to *people*, to *community*, and to *family* with 131 mentions. This reflects attachment to the familiar. The word *community* was the second most frequently used word after *art* or *artist*.

Cities that were industrial hubs, like Lawrence, Haverhill, and Methuen changed considerably during their rapid growth and post-industrial periods both bringing waves of new immigrants seeking first generation opportunities, affordable housing, and a better quality of life. Meanwhile, other communities with more agrarian economies like Georgetown or Salisbury changed little. Newburyport or Andover, each with distinct economies and histories, retained much of their physical character evolving in ways reflective of growing populations with wealth, or what some might call gentrification. Others have experienced suburban-like development since the 1970s, losing the older New England character others fought to retain.



History Important Yet Non-inclusive

- IV. The history of the region is important to some yet appreciation is often narrow, especially relative to Native, pre-colonial, and immigrant histories.

Describing differences in communities, one survey respondent cited, "*diversity not to mention unique histories.*" Another cited the, "*layers of history here*" without specifying their nature. In responding to a question of what they saw in the book that was new, one survey respondent cited, "*acknowledgement of the Indigenous People.*" Another wrote, "*acknowledgement up front of native people STILL being here* (emphasis original)."

One book club participant observed that, "*some families that have been here forever don't want things to change.*" In spite of that, others observed changes taking place. Lawrence and

Methuen, in particular were cited as becoming more culturally active and diverse. Newburyport, once a maritime center, has become, “a vibrant art town with more galleries,” added another book club participant.

At the same time, the colonial narrative is prevalent in the area. Visitors and those growing up there see and visit a large number of historic sites and homes. Those places tell the story of rugged colonists persevering through hardship in conflict with nature and sometimes Native peoples.

History and *memories* were among the lower number of mentions in the book text (28) but mentions of *the handmade*, *events*, and specific places contained considerable historical meanings. *Nature* and *natural phenomenon* accounted for 128 mentions suggesting a value to places untouched by modern development.

The fact that different parts of the region have distinct development histories was discussed in two book clubs. These include coastal and port communities, industrial cities populated by immigrant workers, and small towns based in agricultural economies. This resulted in communities and their populations and local cultures evolving very differently.

Interest in Stories and Learning

- V. Heightened interest in stories of the region from varying points of view indicates greater appreciation of neighboring communities and learning more about the diversity of people, geography, and stories.



As referenced above, the high number of text mentions in the book to experiences, events, and activities illustrate an appreciation of things that are out of the ordinary, an appreciation of multiple aspects of living in the Valley. This suggests curiosity and openness to discovery and learning about other places, people, and stories. One long-term resident of Newburyport in a book club said, “I’d like to know more about other places, like Boxford.”

One book club participant suggested the book served to *“expand perspectives as to what is your community and your belonging and responsibility.”* Another book club member described the Cultural Focal Points map and book as a *“gateway to learn more about people.”* Another observed, *“how images [in the book] entice people to venture into places they were otherwise unfamiliar with.”* Many suggested expanding the book or repeating the undertaking, perhaps even as a periodical and more than one suggested it spotlight young people. *“There’s lots more talent. The book represents a mere small sample,”* said one book club participant.

“Creating this resource,” wrote one survey respondent, *“also allows connectivity between communities both through discovering similarities between resources/assets as well as differences.”* Another wrote that they learned of *“North Andover’s rich and interesting history. I thought it was a pop-up, soul-less suburb.”* Another wrote, *“I LOVED learning more about Lawrence”*.



In response to a survey question of whether the book and map changed their perception, 50% said not at all or neutral; 50% said somewhat or a lot. However, most considered themselves frequent visitors between communities. One retired book club participant who enjoys day trips said, *“you don’t hear about what to go to to spend an afternoon or a day to see many things.”* Most tourism promotion, they found, highlights single attractions.

Culturally Aware Planning

VI. MVPC demonstrated receptivity to crowd-sourced community engagement and to exploring the layers and significance of the cultural dimensions of communities.

In the final book club discussion, one participant observed that cultural asset mapping was an *“exciting sort of first step to begin to identify those assets that we find really round out our communities.”* They went on to advocate that it is important in planning, *“that we begin to incorporate [cultural assets] alongside the business inventories that we have and alongside the zoning maps that we have, and alongside the housing inventories that we have.”*

One survey respondent wrote, *“Sharing the love is great,”* but asked if *“the map [is] informing leaders what people value and why.”* This remains a question for the project long-term as the Cultural Focal Points map becomes available for use by planners and others.

Enthusiasm shown by MVPC and its nimble and creative staff made the project possible. The Chair of the Commission’s board, after reading the book, wrote, *“What a marvelous book... It is really quite captivating bringing the Merrimack Valley together in art, photography and*

commentary. We, here in the Merrimack Valley have a very unique history and culture within the Commonwealth, one that is diverse yet continues to grow as one large community. I am very proud to be a part of the MVPC and the fine work that the commission provides for the cities and towns of the Valley."



A participant in the planner's book club remarked, *"If we want to build vibrant, dynamic communities that are desirable, that we like to live in, and that we want to continue to live in then we need to prioritize arts and culture."*

Work on the project by planner Nate Robertson was backed by his colleagues and the Commission director and board. He contributed in many ways to the entire project and took on leadership for the digital map. Pivoting as conditions changed and harvesting learning as the project iterated, appeared to come easily for Nate and MVPC.

Building on Partnerships

- VII. Project partners built on their capacities and networks of (known) cultural and arts organizations yet limits were evident in regard to the diversity of the connections.**

Established networks among cultural organizations in the Valley proved functional. At times they expressed enthusiasm about the mapping project. There was willingness to bring work and resources to the table. That said, it was found during the project that they had limits especially in regard to connections with young people and communities of color. Their range of what

constitutes arts and culture was narrowly defined. This is not unusual especially in older and smaller communities without fully staffed arts agencies able to actively build relationships.

One book club participant said they would like to see more collaboration on a county scale. Some expressed a desire for a more unified source of information on cultural activities and opportunities. One book club participant relatively new to the area and looking for information to make connections said it was hard to know who does what. In regard to information on cultural resources, they asked, “how does it tie together and how does it work?”

For Elevated Thought, the project helped expand the range of skills and experience for staff and youth. It added exposure for ET among other organizations in the Valley, provided experience with formal planning practices, and helped form new relationships.

For MVPC, the project appeared to expand relationships with arts and cultural communities, added new experience with participatory interactive mapping, and enhanced understanding of culturally based community planning concerns and especially the breadth of what might be considered cultural assets and resources.

For ECCF, the project exercised and built on networks across Merrimack Valley in the arts, cultural, and civic arenas, experience with participatory mapping and building the groundwork for cultural planning and for future mapping in the County.





Recommendations

Five recommendations below are in the form of a framework for further planning and do not constitute a plan per se. The recommendations support ECCF's approach to its community leadership work as they address three conditions of systems change: structural (policies, practices, resources), relational (connections, power dynamics), and transformational (beliefs and assumptions about art and culture).

1. Explore options for some form of publication or platform for sharing expressions to highlight creative talent in the region following the success of the Expression Book. This should be done in combination with examining and addressing barriers that prevented more engagement in the Expression Book and Cultural Focal Points map especially relative to relationships with youth and BIPOC communities, and to expanding definitions of culture and art.
2. Evolve cultural asset mapping into ongoing community-wide conversations about what people value, diversity within the region, and ways to discover and learn more about neighboring people and communities. This might include using the format and approach of the Expression Book and map with schools to help young people both share their creativity and explore the breadth and diversity of surrounding communities.

3. Promote the exchange of creativity and cultures between communities to build social capital with a focus on intergenerational and cross-cultural bridge building. This may be conjoined with item 1, above, or could constitute a separate program of supporting “touring artists”, touring projects, or active exchanges between communities and artists in different parts of the Valley. Ultimately, this could be a program of the network described in item 4, below, but could begin sooner.



4. Formalize an ongoing network of cultural organizations, artists, and cultural workers in Essex County. This network may be in the form of a collaborative or an independent organization launched from ECCF. It could build around an inclusive and broad Vision Statement (example):

Essex County is made up of diverse, welcoming communities where cultural practices and creativity are actively pursued and actively flow between communities; where people feel a sense of belonging, connectedness, and efficacy within their communities; where people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds are valued and involved, and where cultures and creativity are valued and generate value.



5. Expand the cultural mapping work to include the remainder of Essex County. To do so, devise a mapping process that works across and connects the remaining 19 municipalities in the County. This should be composed of at least two parts:
 - Build a parallel Cultural Focal Points map for the 19 communities that are within the purview of the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission. MVPC identified a flexible, visually attractive, and user-friendly mapping platform to collect map points, stories, and images from users across the Merrimack Valley. Maintaining a compatible platform for the rest of the municipalities would enable easier use and potential combination of the two. While crowd sourcing should be a dimension of the mapping, it is unlikely to be viable as the primary source of data.
 - Collect and share stories across the 19 communities using activities and media more attractive to youth such as video or street art. Based on the Merrimack Valley experience, identifying and highlighting creative talent and stories of people and place helped to promote interest in the wider area and in the diversity of cultures and creative expression found across the County. This should be continued across the County.



Merrimack Valley Place and Meaning 2020 **Essex County Cultural Mapping Project**

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In partnership with

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Lawrence History Center ~ Susan Grabski

Elevated Thought ~ Marquis Victor and Alex J. Brien

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i am art. i am change.

