



# Community Engagement and Collaboration for Exhibit Planning

Cultural Exhibit Project at Lowell National Historical Park

Spotlight Series Presentation

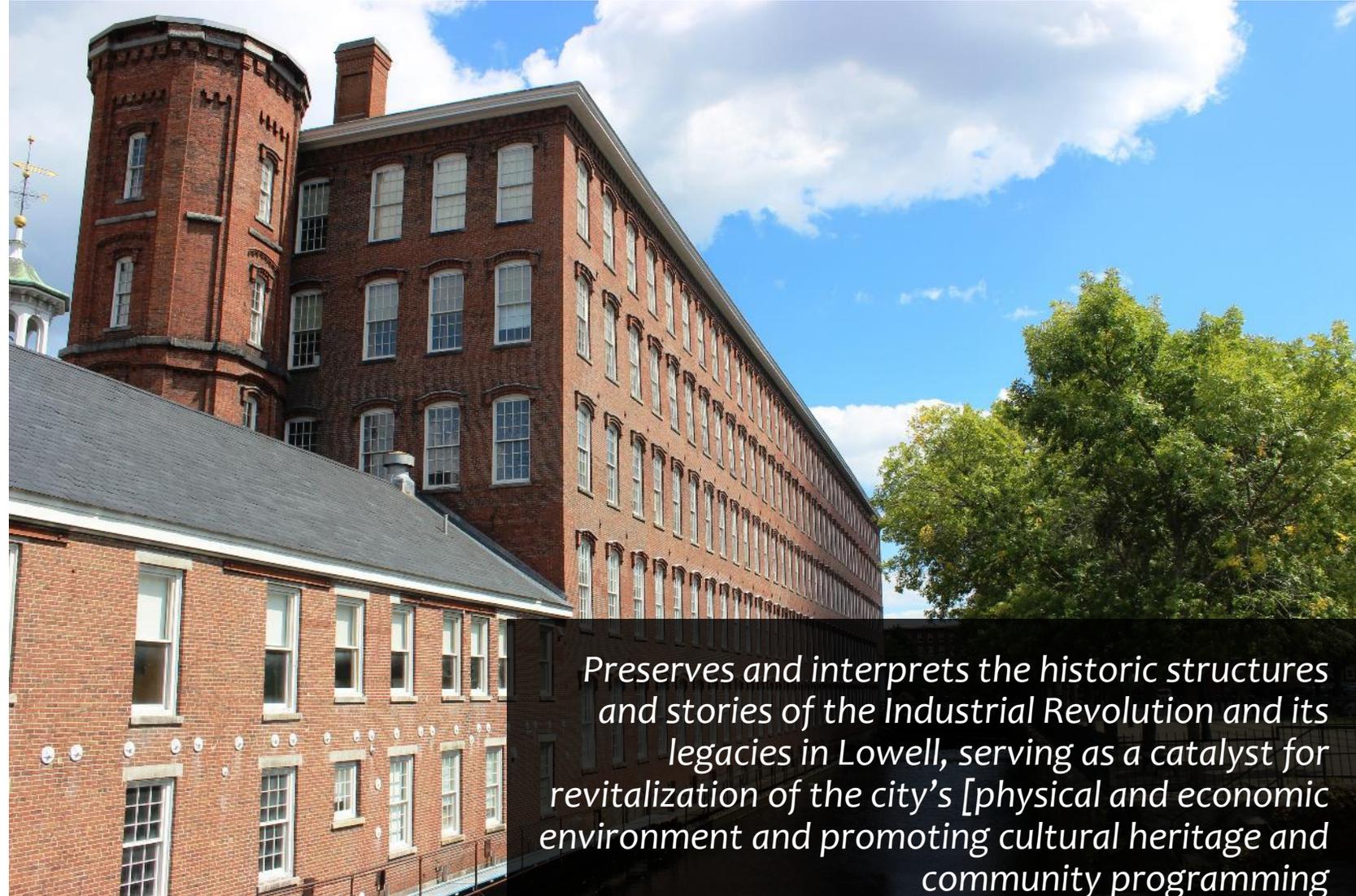
March 30, 2021

Emily Donovan, Park Ranger & Co-Project Manager

# Fundamental Resources and Values

- Water Power System/Canal System
- Boott Cotton Mills Complex
- Immersive Experience
- Cultural Heritage and Arts Programming
- Historic Urban Industrial Landscape
- Partnerships
- Museum Collections

# Lowell National Historical Park



*Preserves and interprets the historic structures and stories of the Industrial Revolution and its legacies in Lowell, serving as a catalyst for revitalization of the city's [physical and economic environment and promoting cultural heritage and community programming*



# The Park is the City and The City is the Park

It's also my hometown!

- City of about 110,000
- 27% Identify as Foreign Born
- 44% speak a language other than English
- 60 Languages spoken at the High School



# Park of Partnerships

## Formal and Informal

- City of Lowell for Economic and Preservation Initiatives and Lowell Folk Fest
- University of Massachusetts Lowell for research and our Education Division, Tsongas Industrial History Center
- Numerous institutions (Learning Cities, Community College, Community Teamwork)
- Our Community (programs, festivals)

# Current Immigration Exhibit

Part of the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center (Former Boardinghouse)

Completed in 1988





**Current Immigration Exhibit**  
Community-driven for its time

# The Future Exhibit Will...

## Non-negotiables

- Replace the existing and dated exhibition about immigrants, installed in 1988.
- Solicit community input in shaping the themes and direction of the exhibit.
- Tell the stories of diverse cultures and cultural changes that have found their place(s) in Lowell and give it its distinctive urban composition.
- Provide a safe and accessible visitor experience that is audience-centered and relevant to 21st-century visitors, including currently underserved audiences.
- Enable visitors to see themselves in and better understand others through the exhibit experience.
- Evaluate exhibit development and design at every stage.

“Lowell is a microcosm of the historical and contemporary shifting of cultural identities and tensions brought about by broader social changes such as industrialization, urbanization, and globalization.”

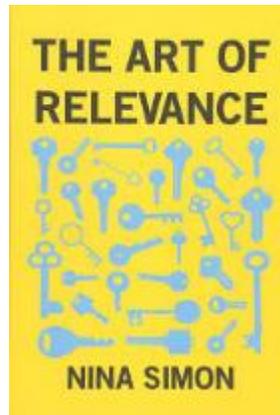
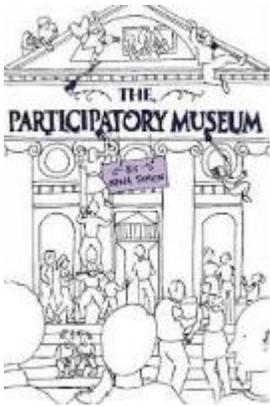
# Project Schedule

Date and Phase	Tasks
Summer 2018: Funding Obtained	PMIS Project from 2015 awarded through rec fee funding
Fall 2018 – Fall 2019: Pre-Design	Project leads selected Community Roundtable Process Determined and Started Themes and Direction of Exhibit SOW for Planning and Design Contract
Fall 2019 – Spring 2021: Planning and Design	Planning and Design of Exhibit Ongoing programming WITH Community Reviewing Deliverables and Refining through Community Roundtable Process
Summer 2021 – Fall 2022: Fabrication	Building Exhibit and Creating Original Content Building Project for accessibility Continued programming WITH Community
Fall 2023	Exhibit opens!

# Other Models and Research Phase (2016-2017)

## Nina Simon- Art of Relevance and Participatory Museum

- How can institutions (museums, cultural orgs, NPS) matter more to people?
- Design and story telling in spaces by involving community members in the process
- Visitor curated, community interests, etc.



## Wing Luke Museum in Seattle, WA

- Community Advisory Board that works with Museum
  - Community-based work must be rooted in relationships of trust and respect.
  - Community-based work requires listening, flexibility, agility and patience.
  - Community ownership of their stories enables communities to hold and use them towards their own self-determined purposes.



## International Sites of Conscience – Authentic Community Engagement

- Listening to community needs
- Asset Mapping
- Cone of Possibility



# Work Groups Come Together to Meet Goals

- I. Build greater relevance
- II. Craft engaging Experiences
- III. Contribute to positive change
- IV. Employ technology effectively
- V. Create a culture of collaboration and inclusion





# What stories do we even tell?



The Park Wasn't Sure...



# What stories should your site be telling?

WHO should be telling these stories?





# A Community-Driven Exhibit

Commitment to engaging our community with the ENTIRE exhibit process



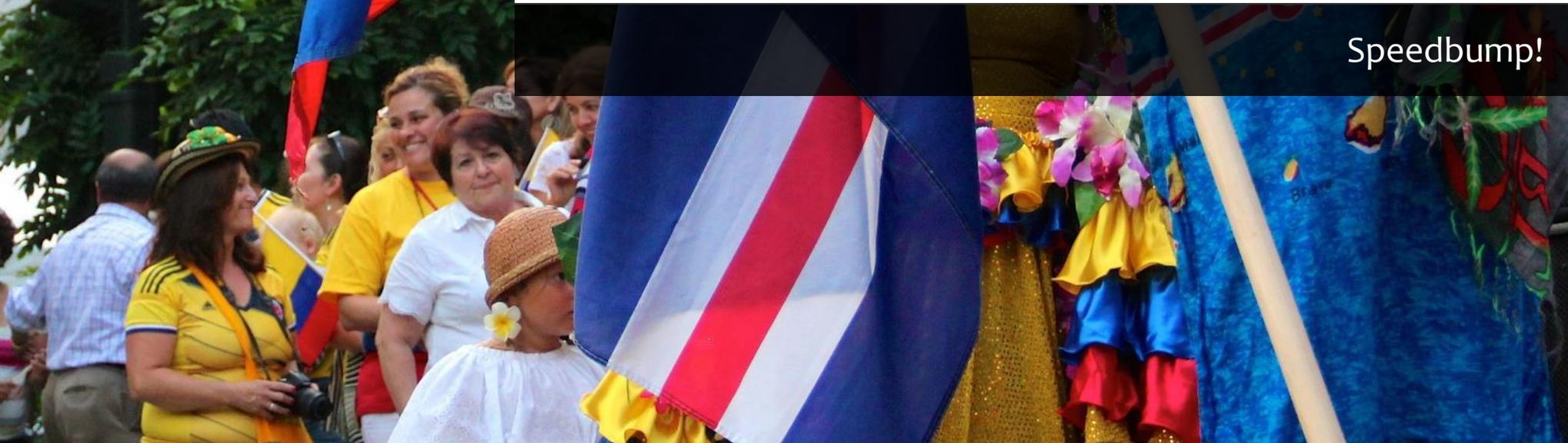
# Federal Advisory Committee Act



Speedbump!



# Who Do We Choose?



Speedbump!



# Community Roundtable Discussions

An iterative approach to community  
engagement

# Community Roundtable Discussions

- Began in Fall 2018
- About 25 people to start
- Lived experience is key



# Community Roundtable Discussions

How they work in practice

- Structure is open, although invitations have been extended iteratively
- Open-ended Questions, Speaking From Lived Experiences
- Small-group discussions with large group share outs
- Staff Take on an Active Listening Role
- Iterative: Is this what we heard? How can we build on it?
- Park staff is responsible for Decision-Making





# Managing Expectations

Of Staff and Stakeholders

# Roles and Expectations

## Community Members

- Discuss main message, themes, and storylines for exhibit
- Discuss atmosphere and look/feel of exhibit
- Act as an avenue of communication with local organizations and communities
- Provide direction for gathering oral histories, artifacts, images, documents, etc.
- Meet regularly with park staff
- Provide content and subject matter expertise
- Review design contractor products

## Park Staff Members

- Attend Community Roundtable/Review notes from meetings
- Discuss main message, themes, and storylines for exhibit (Project Team Decides)
- Discuss atmosphere and look/feel of exhibit (Project Team Decides)
- Provide content and subject matter expertise
- Review design contractor products
- Conduct community engagement and programming and collection of materials

# Staff Responsible for Decision Making

While Maintaining Community-Driven Ethos!

- All decision points are filtered through the project team
- Often have to go to steering committee (Project Team plus Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent, Director of Educational Partnership, Museum Education Supervisor (UML), and Architect
- Lots of listening and synthesizing and going back and making sure we heard correctly
- Synthesizing comments from (50+ stakeholders)



Do you have examples of struggles around managing expectations? Any best practices?

From your community partners? From your staff?

# Questions and Examples of Meetings

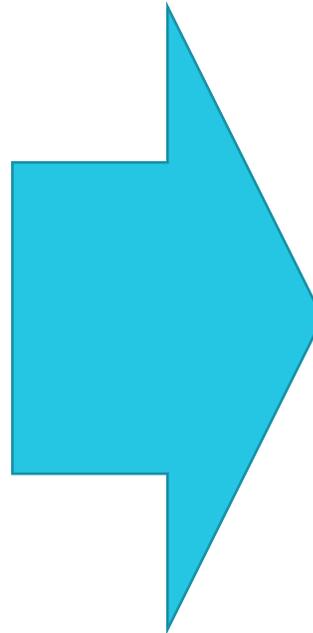
## Early Planning Processes

Month	Questions Considered
October 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Project Overview</li><li>• What should be the main purpose of the new exhibit about cultural identity/diversity?</li><li>• Are there important stories and lessons the exhibit might offer?</li><li>• How does Lowell's past connect to the conversations about cultural diversity that are taking place today?</li></ul>
November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are the important themes and stories that should be highlighted in the exhibit?</li><li>• How should matters of gender and class inform the content of the project?</li></ul>
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How is gender connected with any of the identified themes?</li><li>• How is race connected with any of the identified themes?</li><li>• How is class connected with any of the identified themes?</li></ul>
February 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do these theme questions accurately represent discussions from previous meetings?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What resonates with you?</li><li>• Is there something missing?</li></ul></li><li>• How should stories be told in the exhibit to make our audiences feel excited, challenged, and curious?</li></ul>
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Do these concepts accurately represent discussions from previous meetings?<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is there something missing?</li></ul></li><li>• What stories, people, objects, events, phenomena, and/or media could help illustrate these concepts?</li></ul>
September	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review thematic outline in preparation for the design/development contract</li><li>• Revisit public program opportunities</li></ul>
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduction to the design/development team</li><li>• Review of thematic scheme</li></ul>

# Themes for Exhibit

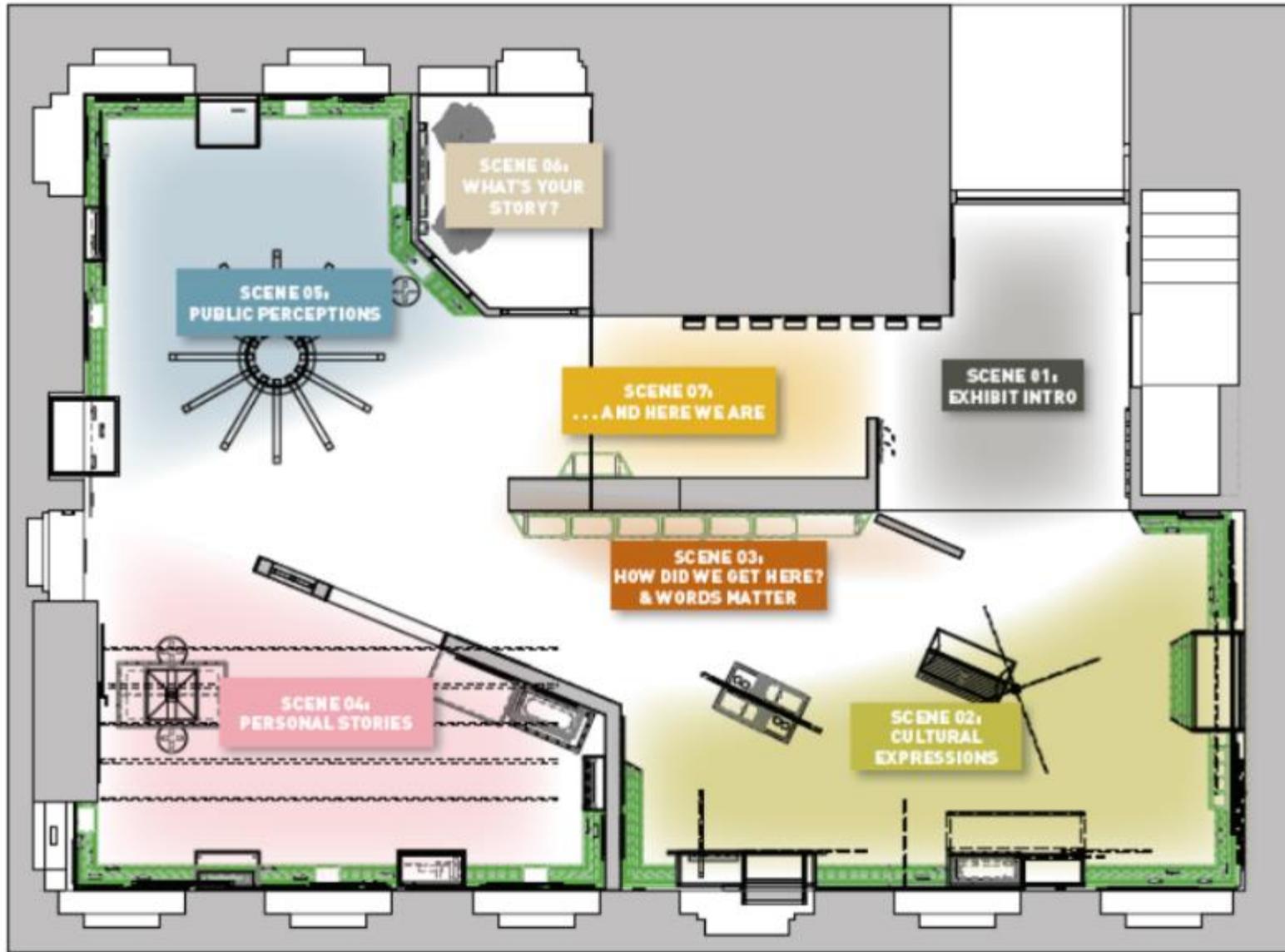
## November 2018

- I. **Pushing and Pulling**
  - I. National, state, local immigration policy
  - II. Reasons for coming, going, staying, leaving
- II. **Newcomers**
  - I. How Lowell treats newcomers (acceptance/rejection)
  - II. Successes and challenges
- III. **Representation**
  - I. Who tells the stories
  - II. Erased/forgotten stories
- IV. **Intergenerational**
  - I. Perpetuating culture
  - II. Family roles and generational differences
- V. **Cultural Diversity and Commonalities**
  - I. Similarities of experiences/traditions across cultures and times
  - II. Acknowledging specificities of cultures



## February 2019

- I. **Pushing and Pulling:** What are the key factors that compel or encourage persons to relocate from their family or place of birth?
- II. **Newcomers:** What are the experiences and perspectives that newly arrived persons engage upon their arrival in a new and perhaps very different city such as Lowell? What struggles did they face when arriving and adjusting to “American” Life?
- III. **Building Community:** How do we select or reject the social groups with whom we choose to live and work? How has the definition of community changed over time? How do issues that communities face impact individuals, the community, and the city?
- IV. **Intergenerational:** How are cultural traditions and practiced maintained, transformed, or abandoned between generational groups? How does this evolution impact individuals, family units, community, and the city of Lowell?
- V. **Cultural Diversity and Commonalities:** What is the merit of a multicultural city such as Lowell? How have people come together- through time and across great distances- to interact, share experiences, and redefine the concepts of “us” and belonging? How do specific, universal, and cross-cultural experiences define the Lowell cultural Landscape?



## *Cultural Diversity is the Basis for a Vibrant Lowell and America*

- Mobility and Transition
- Cultural Diversities and Commonalities
- Building Community



Our Planning and Design Contractors Fall 2019 Through  
Spring 2021

## **Working with The Design Minds**

# Planning and Design

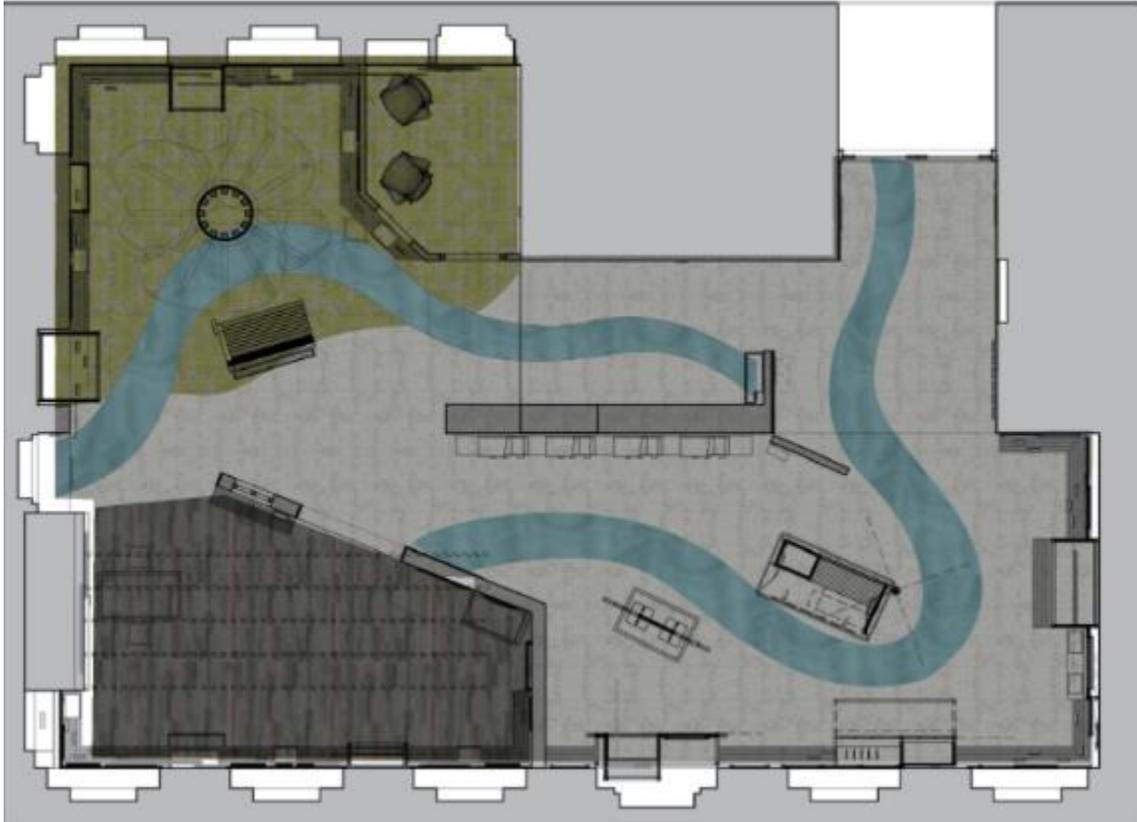
It's Process, not a product

- Reviewing and commenting on The Design Minds Deliverables
- Synthesizing 300-600 comments plus the discussions of Roundtable Meetings for each phase
- Community Roundtable Meetings going Virtual!
- Community Engagement continues



# Participation of Community Members

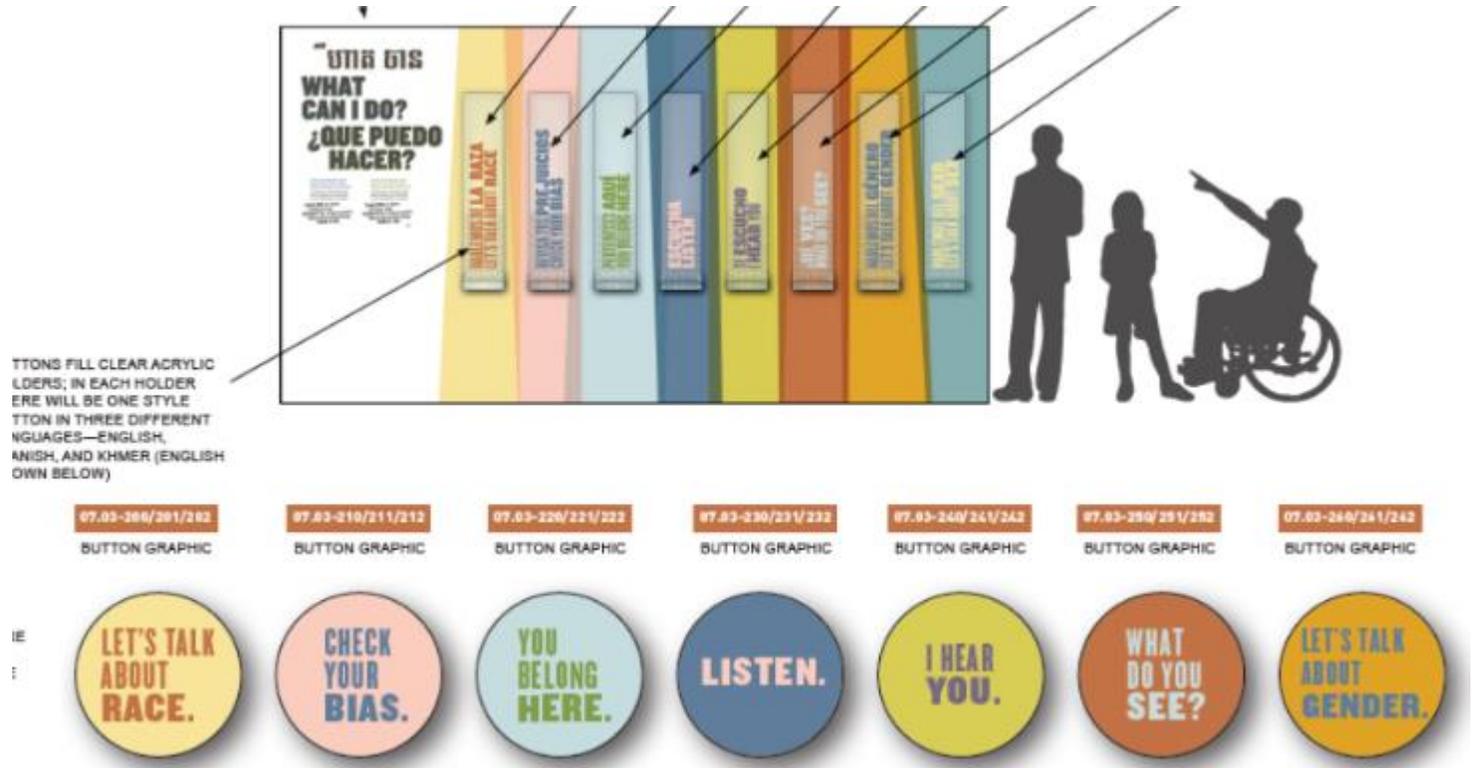
## Ebbs and Flows



- Sustaining engagement during Pandemic
- Choosing discussion topics
- Honoring lived experiences and earlier conversations and turning them into specifics
- Ambassadors to the community

# Additional Lessons Learned

- Continual process
- Appreciation in the community
- Commitment to listening, commitment to moving forward



ក្រុងមួយ វប្បធម៌ច្រើន

ONE CITY,  
MANY CULTURE

ONE CITY,  
MANY CULTURES

CITIES ARE CULTURAL CROSSROADS. WE COME TO CITIES TO COLLABORATE AND SHARE, TO LIVE, TO WORK, AND SOMETIMES TO BEGIN LIFE AGAIN.

The place we now call Lowell has been a crossroads of this human experience for thousands of years, a place where people have brought ways of thinking, being, and living. Sometimes this process is exciting. Sometimes it is marked by conflict. Sometimes it provides opportunities for change.

This exhibit explores the meeting of people and the shared experiences that create the communities that make up Lowell today.

LAS CIUDADES SON PUNTOS DE ENCUENTRO DE CULTURAS. LLEGAMOS A ELLAS PARA COLABORAR Y COMPARTIR, CONVIVIR, TRABAJAR Y, A VECES, REINICIAR UNA NUEVA VIDA.

El lugar que ahora llamamos Lowell ha sido un punto de encuentro de esta experiencia humana durante miles de años, un lugar al que la gente ha introducido formas de pensar, ser y vivir. A veces este proceso es emocionante. Otras, está marcado por el conflicto. Y, otras más, ofrece oportunidades para el cambio.

Esta exposición explora la reunión de personas y experiencias compartidas que crean las comunidades que conforman Lowell en la actualidad.

# You're Invited!

Exhibit to Open- Fall 2023