

# EXISTING RIVER

## THE RIVER: ITS PRESENCE AND SOURCE

Flowing quietly, inconspicuously along the western edge of downtown Lee, is the Housatonic River. (See Introduction, regarding geologic history and the river's original formation due to drainage). As we stand in the river's presence we can perceive it for the phenomena that is immediately there, as well as expand our awareness to the greater Berkshire region of which the river ecosystem belongs:

The river ORIGINATES (\* see regional diagram) about 15 miles northward of Lee with three upland branches: a 'westward' branch begins in Lanseborough; a 'southwestward' branch begins near Upperwest Pittsfield and New Ashford. The 'eastward', strongest and (18 mi) longest branch originates in the mountainland of the town of Washington, and then loops northward to Hinsdale and Dalton, then circles southeast down to Pittsfield-- where all branches converge to become the single Housatonic River... which then meanders southward at a moderate pace, passing through the valley of Lee, through Connecticut (through the Housatonic Forest and then curving westward to touch the NY border, and then eastward to widen into Lake Lillinona) and finally draining into Long Island Sound/Atlantic ocean-- a Housatonic length of 124 miles from Lee-- a 142 mile total river stretch. (In the ocean-sound the Housatonic joins other great rivers: the mouth of Housatonic lies between the Hudson 60 miles to the west and the Connecticut River 40 miles to the east).

The HOUSATONIC and the HOOSIC are the two major Berkshire county rivers-- part of a vast water network that help drain that New England landscape. The surface drainage of Berkshire county is multi-directional: The Housatonic River drains the central and south-central county of which Lee belongs (though little of the Housatonic watershed lies in Berkshire upland). The Hoosic River drains the northwest county-- it is northward flowing, begins near the Housatonic in Dalton, and flows toward Vermont, through upper NY to link to the Hudson System. The whole east county is drained by the Connecticut River system. In ancient days the rivers flowed faster and migrated more laterally-- now instead cut deeper and, settled slower, more stable. The Housatonic is more rapid in steeper places of north county and slower in lower valley. Water flow and quantity vary throughout-- due to watershed, channel, steepness and dams. In the Housatonic's history there has been a changing pattern of dams that have been collected or eliminated, and varying watershed situations throughout the river-length-- effecting water value, quantity and flow; (the issue of watershed protection, and adding/subtracting dams in future shall remain. (Also, see below regarding pollution)).

The river's natural, historic, experiential/recreational, functional, and economic potential values can all be better understood if conceptualized from several points of view: in terms of the greater region, the downtown landuse pattern as a whole, and then in tints of meaning relevant to specific downtown areas:

**LEE-IN-THE-BERKSHIRES: THE RIVER CAN MOST ELEVATE LEE'S OUTSIDE IMAGE:**

Be it in the mind's of Lee's citizens or visitors, whenever Lee is thought of, the river should be part of the picture. To conceptualize Lee without recognizing the river is to obscure Lee's beauty and deny it's heritage. (Factual expression and knowledge about the river should be considered a 'normative mandate'— the extent and terms of which are a design issue). The river is Lee's original co-determinant, and is now an underlying component of order, and a latent force to be re-harnessed (if only metaphorically). The town is historically interpretable as an ongoing "river-engagement": Lee has always been river-engaged in its physical and behavioral structure— at first for transport and power and now potentially recreationally and symbolically. At this writing, like never before, the river could be vitally engaged to bring additional uses, pleasure, and pride to townspeople, and draw regional and extra-regional visitors of economic import. The river area is Lee's most immediately tappable resource/amenity, having unique cost-effective strength to hallmark the town with an elevated value and status. To reveal and reap the tremendous multiple-value of the river area could exponentially radiate an enhanced image of the entire town through the greater region and beyond: the river's "good" attribute(s) would be identified with Lee as a whole. It is difficult to here overstate just how powerful "river-as-image-maker" and "river as place" could be within overall an revitalization strategy.

**THE RIVER WITHIN THE TOWN-WHOLE COMPOSITION:** Enhancement of the river would make sense in terms of larger physical (structures, spaces, resources) and activity patterns within the downtown. As a positive place it's forces would help activate the town-- giving Lee a renewed quality of dynamic unity and completeness. (See landuse diagram). For example: at present the downtown grid order (set in rural context) around the dominant Main Street spine, results in e/west bifurcation of spatial use with asymmetrical weight. In that context, there is a "begging for balance" by way for some strong westside complement to the already fulfilled eastside hill-- to achieve the need for having proportional vital attraction at both the east and west flanks-- with a strong pattern of spatial/structural use in both areas-- (and would simultaneously contribute an activation of the Main Street corridor between them). An enhanced river area would not only play that role, but would better knit the north and south segments of town. Also, as a west boundry, the enhanced river would serve as experiential/activity 'interface' between the urban downtown and the contextual ruralwild-- instead of just being the residual 'dead area' it appears now. The river-within-downtown-pattern could also entail the various positive relations outlined in the paragraphs below, that would operate simultaneously, to epiphenomenally "whip up various synergies" for downtown as a whole. Interactive forces (from river's value) would act upon the downtown grossly in terms of n/s and e/w quadrants, and netly to connect between the pattern of the different five use-areas: Oval Park, Eaton/Backside/RR Area, the Northend, Main Street and the Residential Hill-- to strengthen them individually, and in unison. (Described below:)

## THE RIVER IN LEE (COMPONENT-DESCRIPTION)

**RIVER SUB-AREAS:** The designated "river area" of downtown Lee consists of: the river channel (which varies 75-120' wide, +- 40' deep, with a July water movement time of 200 hrs from Hindales to Scheffield), the island, the river banks, the adjacent wooded flats and meadowed flats (with more open grass on the east side), and the adjacent west side wooded slopes/upland (with some abutting residences). Elements composing those sub-areas (summarized from the separate analysis sections of this paper) are:

**RIVER STRUCTURES:** The mill building (with its interlocking walls, dam, and terraced and banked spaces) is the highly significant, and the only building immediately on the river. Other buildings lie peripherally: Sullivan Station, Genedels, Arobi, the lower RR Street residences, Price Chopper, Post Office, and certain Center Street buildings. Of issue, visually/spatially/behaviorally-- regards establishing a relation of inclusion vs distinction vs separation between the river area and those adjacent off-site buildings & spaces. (Residences within the west of the river upland are deemed outside of the proposal area; their privacy should be protected as they enjoy better views and access-to the river-without being disrupted by the upgrade of general public activity). Other structures now in use are the Park and Center Street bridges and the train trestle (with maintenance pending). Note that a bypass either side of roadway at river is constructionally convenient (if otherwise feasible) and so might entail additional or revised bridge design.

**RIVER LANDFORM:** The midtown lateral e-w cross section: reveals good contour diversity-- from the western slopes, to the west banks, the deep channel floor, east banks, flatland-- and continuing up to the eastern Residential Hill. The longitudinal s-n cross section: reveals moderate change from the level south end to the dramatic elevation build up in the north end (with mill walls and rolling banks expressing the contour difference between the water elevation and the higher land). The downtown's Residential Hill and larger distant regional hills are seen in the background as part of the river's landscape, where originally the river helped carve the valley beyond. See enclosed soil analysis for construction limitations in the river area.

**RIVER PLANTS:** The river has a combination of intact and disrupted plant communities (where town construction abutts or clearing once occurred for gardens etc, as shown in old photographs) resulting in a varied pattern with different (+-) value potential for revitalized river activity. The river edge abutting much of Eaton area is treeless and open, but elsewhere has deciduous trees in random cluster pattern, mixing trees of significant and insignificant stature, with (often prohibitive) understory brush. The west slope is wooded. Succession grass/brush occurs irregularly with eroded soil in the residual open areas, suggesting need for a designed degree of additional planting (ground cover/grass for stabilization and trees for space and shade) particularly near the Eaton/chopper area on both sides of the river, and in the Railroad Street area yards. The offsite patterns of distant forested landform is favorably viewable as part of the river's borrowed landscape. (See detailed plant analysis).

RIVER MICROCLIMATE: The river offers great variety of microclimates through the year, which are mostly positive in warmer seasons-- including wind, precipitation, and temperature changes that seem appealingly virgin, naturally 'giving and taking' and freely changing -- in that are isolated from downtown structural interference. However the extremities of summer and especially winter are felt severly on the river, (analogous to Main Street, but without the sporadic and contrived changes that the Main Street structures cause). The general corridor has severe cold winter wind and valley temperature on some days, though simultaneously offers some protection within the banks, under bridges, beside the mill. Summer has a range of full open areas (and it is important to keep much area open for full sun when desired) as well as offers some (though inaccessible) select shade in wooded places or below the banks. However Additional shade is very needed in a determined proportion of the Eaton river area. Welcomed cool breezes occur occasionally. On site modification (shade trees, sitting sun and shade orientations, landform cold shelter etc) would extend season comfort, but only LIMITEDLY; but we at same time, as a unique town place, should value the entire range (including extremes) of river microclimate. The fullness and subtleties of river microclimate give an enhanced experiential quality of not just winter and summer but the transitions of spring and autumn. (Nearby comfort of offsite structures and spaces (eg in the Eaton area, the Mill, Sullivans etc) could provide a refuge, and extend the use of the river for those who are more timid about braving the climatic extremes (as hikers indeed would want to do)).

RIVER SPACE: The existing river space has a capacity for a variety of recreational activity and psychologically profound "spatial experience" (if made accessible). Additional formal design treatment of subspace within the overall corridor space could further improve spatial-sensation and activity-potential (with better defined and sized proportionate spatial forms and sequence, eg. of node, corridor, or planal patterns-- based on biomorphic, rectilinear, or circular line... in desirable relation to existing space). The issue of creating spatial formality that is 'strong and clear' Vs 'complex or ambiguous or mysterious' is also significant-- while the river area is now the most "natural" (unbuilt) place in downtown. (Besides adding trees and reshaped landform to articulate space, selective clearing would also enhance useable and apparant spatial size, but this should be done cautiously to maintain or complement intimate spatial experience). Description: The existing river area space entails SEVERAL SCALES of design: it is generally a 'lineal corridor', with a gently undulating straight segment and a north elbow. It is of moderate scale, on one hand with a sense of intimacy when well as comfortably absorb high numbers of pedestrians throughout its varied land surfaces, upon the water itself, and potential or existing nearby structures. Also, within the general corridor, is an intriguing diversity of subspaces-- open/enclosed, under or beyond canopy, the throughout irregularities of the banks, flats, slopes, 'leaks' w vistas, and 'merges', and often mysterious spatial relationships. At still another scale, the whole corridor space has a dynamic sense of a "forceful determined movement", with slightly jarring and quivering fluidness (interpretable emotively widely, as either 'timid', 'effortful' or 'powerful', as if flowing within nature's struggling dialectic like the river itself over time). The north elbow's powerful spatial 'turn' can produce experiential sequences from all directions with further mystery

and dynamicism. Moreover, the river space (especially 'laterally') varies seasonally: it retracts and expands with changing season's vegetation (which is irregular in its articulation), the snow coverage, atmospheric mist, light/shade of the day and night-- effecting not only the scale but apparant proportion of space. All this occurs under the larger sense of the distant landform enclosure... and the even larger curved sky-space (that sometimes arches clear and wide, while other times spatially advances or fragments in cloudcover). As the river itself regularly changes from reflective surface to bright volume to darkened body, the spatiality of the channel is in constant spatial play as well. In total, the river area's spatial character should ultimately be considered not only in itself, but in relation to the spatial pattern of different downtown areas and the composition of the region (as experienced on foot or vehicle, and in the abstract). ((eg Considering the river and Main Street as variations on a corridor theme; and the river connecting complementarily with Oval Park nodal spaces; the river's lateral or edge type space relationships with the Eaton/Chopper/RR expanse; the spatial connections entailed in outward vistas; and the river related to the larger valley spaces that people ultimately encounter within the Berkshire region)).

**RIVER CIRCULATION:** At present no pedestrian circulation formally exists to or along the river, although latent desire-lines abound and are essential in order to make the river valuable for residents and visitors... as a recreational place, an alternate connector between the north and south ends of town, a terminus from anywhere along Main Street & the residential hill, a continuity of Ovalpark, and as a connector to the regional trails from Lenox. Auto access to the river area (which would be uniquely crucial for tapping visitors) is now disguised, but is directly available in the Eaton/Chopper area, and indirectly on Canal, RR, Center and Park Streets, and could be created on the west side of the river side too. Within circulation (ie vehicular approach & parking, pedestrian paths and areas) lie creative possibilities for presenting and unfolding the river's various 'essences' for experience and use-- choreographing how people acquaint themselves with the river and it's multi-properties. There are many possible ways of transversing that would unleash the riverway character, and the complexity (of contrasting and hmonious) properties, in synergistic combinations: eg the ups and down of landform, the different plants and spaces, the various ways to encounter water and microclimate, give creative delivery of sequential views and tie to buildings. Longitudinal riverway attributes could be revealed by accessing the river at its n/s ends (by Center Street/Hill and Park Street). Different thematic lateral revelations could occur by accessing e/w through alleys, new walks through Eaton and chopper areas, and Elm Street (drawn from Main Street/the residential area/the south oval and northend). Combined longitudinal and lateral river attributes could be sensed from RR and Main Street's parallel circulations. Of consideration too are such subtleties as whether the approach and arrival to/from river, (or transitions along the river) should be sudden or gradual, direct or indirect, inward or outward focused, from a tight or open space, etc. More than anywhere else in town, the river area has circulation possibilities throughout-- not just for riverpark access but integrated to an overall downtown program of vehicles and pedestrians.

## WITHIN THE RIVER AREA; GENERAL CONCLUSION

The river area has tremendous LATENT MULTIVALUE for local residents and workers, and for regional & extra-regional (shopping or touring) visitors. The river area's elements (water/plants/landform/some structures/rock air/light/precipitation) already form sub-places of wonderful diversity (ie the changing riverway, banks, island, wooded & meadowed flatland and western slopes, different bridges, the mill) proximate to important downtown buildings & spaces-- as part of the historic/natural Berkshire ecosystem. However, To reap the river area's potential requires careful redesign to provide access to and along the river, views into/from site, spatial quality and definition for recreational and perhaps other activity. This implies redesign of the river area "internally", as well as in its relation to the physical/activity pattern of both downtown and the greater region. ((NOTE: In the river area, more than elsewhere, the rich diversity of elements to be evident in plan and properly conceptualized as a whole, would also be interestingly compounded and transformed in serial experience-- including spaces ranging from smallest introverted crannies to the larger sensed valley, with views unfolding within and outward as one moves about-- eg close views and touch of individual plants, landform, buildings OR of distant view of larger town and offsite wooded landform. From the river, one could experience both the immediate river phenomema and sense the grander Berkshire space-time systems)). While many proposals could fulfill the various isolated and contextual parameters sketched above, a truly "great" idea is needed to insure long term for a most cost-effective rewarding contribution toward revitalization.

During the analysis phase of this project, the studio fielded an inventory of different issues and prototype (polemic) directions that designers might consider as they search for the "supreme river-related idea", and forge integrated town proposals:

- Single, multiple, or continuous river contact.
- Nodal/lineal/planal/or various postmodern river spaces.
- Focused or diluted cost-allocation of the river area.
- Degree of local vs regional orientation (scale of use) of riverpark.
- Degree of definition & structuring; (circular/biomorphic/rectalinear; soft/hard; Simple vs complex or diverse forms of river area).
- Mood (eg serene vs exciting; beautiful vs sublime; plural aesthetic)
- Natural/romantic/industrial/or contemporary-urban imagery in area.
- Contrivances vs purity; mystery vs clarity of imagery in river area.
- Understated vs bold design; conservative, progressive or controversial (ie the concepts, uses, images, marketing).
- Degree of plant/landform/structures and source of materials.
- Lateral vs lineal forces and sequence in terms of spatial relations.
- Immediate vs long term character, uses, results; implimental phases.
- 'Diminishing return' of investment in the river (vs other type invest).
- Active and passive river uses; defined or open-ended; diversity of uses; seasonal programming; Recreation vs energy, waste, drainage, other use.
- River theme continuity with other towns (vs a unique 'Lee Housatonic').
- Pollution; Erosion; Dams; Special construction and legal data.