

This is an excerpt from:

# ***Breakthroughs***

**RE-CREATING THE AMERICAN CITY**

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**and**  
**ROBERT GUSKIND**



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## *The Stowe Recreation Path: Common Ground*

As sunlight dapples the path before you, Vermont's Stowe Recreation Path offers a mind-boggling variety of human activity.

Everywhere there seem to be joggers, strollers, "power walkers." Cyclists roll by on everything from tricycles to fifteen-speed bikes. Several mothers stroll by pushing baby carriages; one is in her jogging togs, toning up her leg muscles with a high-speed carriage roll.

A middle-aged couple is out for a brisk afternoon walk. A bag lady passes by, collecting whatever she can find. Around the bend comes an octogenarian couple, the elderly gentleman in his wheelchair, his wife pushing him along.

Interspersed with the locals are tourists to Vermont's most famous ski and summer resort. For an hour or two, they have abandoned their automobiles to enjoy a true New England townscape on foot; or in wintertime, oftentimes on cross-country skis.

Most of all, the path seems to draw kids. Kids in strollers. Kids walking. Kids running. Kids on roller skis and roller blades and other contraptions few of us who are over thirty can identify. Little tots, grade-school kids, a high school contingent. Spotted all along the path, kids hanging out at their favorite spots.

Everyone in Stowe seems to have incorporated the recreation path into his or her daily life. This walkway, new in the 1980s, has suddenly become Stowe's new main street, a path for all.

And not just that. The path seems to have given rebirth to old-fashioned American community sociability. On almost every "passing by," eye contact gets made. Words of greetings, or some other friendly gesture, are offered. Sometimes people engage in complete conversations about the weather, the stream, perhaps someone's

dog or child. These are not just conversations among friends or acquaintances but between practically anyone on the path—"townie" or tourist, male or female, young or old, blue jean or Abecrombie and Fitch clad.

Here are some basic facts and vital statistics about the Stowe Recreation Path: It is 5.3 miles in length, having been built in two segments—first 2.7 miles, then 2.6 miles—between 1984 and 1989. It consists of an eight-foot-wide asphalt strip laid on a four-inch gravel base with about three feet of grass on each shoulder. It runs from the heart of the village of Stowe, up to the lower flanks of Mount Mansfield, paralleling Stowe's Mountain Road (State Route 108, the main access road to the Mount Mansfield ski area) and the West Branch River. It actually crosses the river ten times by means of ten-foot cambered bridges.

This path is not deluxe, fancy, manicured, or perfect. Along with cameo views of placid Vermont scenes, the route has a reasonable quota of backyards and dumpster views. It is not a fancy creation (the total construction cost was \$657,000, small change in the world of modern infrastructure costs). The project did not happen overnight; indeed, between conception of the idea for the path (1977) to completion of the final segment (1989), a dozen years elapsed. The

***The Stowe Recreation Path runs 5.3 miles, from the heart of the village to the lower flanks of Mount Mansfield. The total construction cost was only \$657,000.***

*(Photograph courtesy of Jeff Turnau, Stowe, Vermont)*



inspiration of having a path in the first instance came from outside government—so did the major push to get it built.

Whatever the Stowe Recreation Path may lack in English garden-style perfection, in massive case investment, or in foresight by public officials, it more than makes up for it on other fronts. It is an exemplar of enthused citizen initiative. It illustrates shrewd Yankee use of a constrained dollar. It offers, to the eye, a flowing, undulating form, relating naturally, delightfully to the Vermont townscape and mountainscape through which it threads.

### *A Pathway's Origins*

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Though the town of Stowe nestles beside Mount Mansfield (at 4,393 feet Vermont's highest peak), tourism was unthought of in its early years. It shared in the state's early wave of settlement as pioneers cleared the land and sold potash from the fallen trees. In the early 1900s, when a million sheep bells could be heard on Vermont's hills, Stowe grazed eight thousand sheep across Mansfield's broad slopes and gentler elevations. Later came a great dairying era, with one hundred Stowe family farms tending 2,800 cows. (The bovine population was almost double the people count of some 1,500 in the 1930s.)

A flow of summer visitors began in the late nineteenth century, and the ski industry got under way in a big way just before World War II. The hills became honeycombed with ski trails, and Stowe declared itself to be the ski capital of eastern America. Some sixty lodges sprang up to tap the wintertime visitor bonanza. In recent years, the summer visitor tide has become practically as heavy. The population has risen to 3,300 permanent residents. One focus of activity is found along Main Street and Stowe Village, but Stowe has also expanded with many homes, restaurants, shops, and offices in the band of territory tucked between the seven-mile road to Mount Mansfield and the West Branch River. The town's elementary and high schools are also nearby.

Claire Lintilhac, who had lived for years near the end of the Mountain Road, became concerned in the late 1970s about the narrow roadway's dangers for walkers and bikers, especially mothers pushing their baby carriages. She expressed her concern to the Vermont Highway Department, commissioning it (anonymously, through a newly founded family foundation) to conduct a \$18,000 study on the potential of a bike/pedestrian path connecting Stowe Village and the mountain. Most townspeople felt, however, that the plan the highway planners came up with was too grandiose, so the

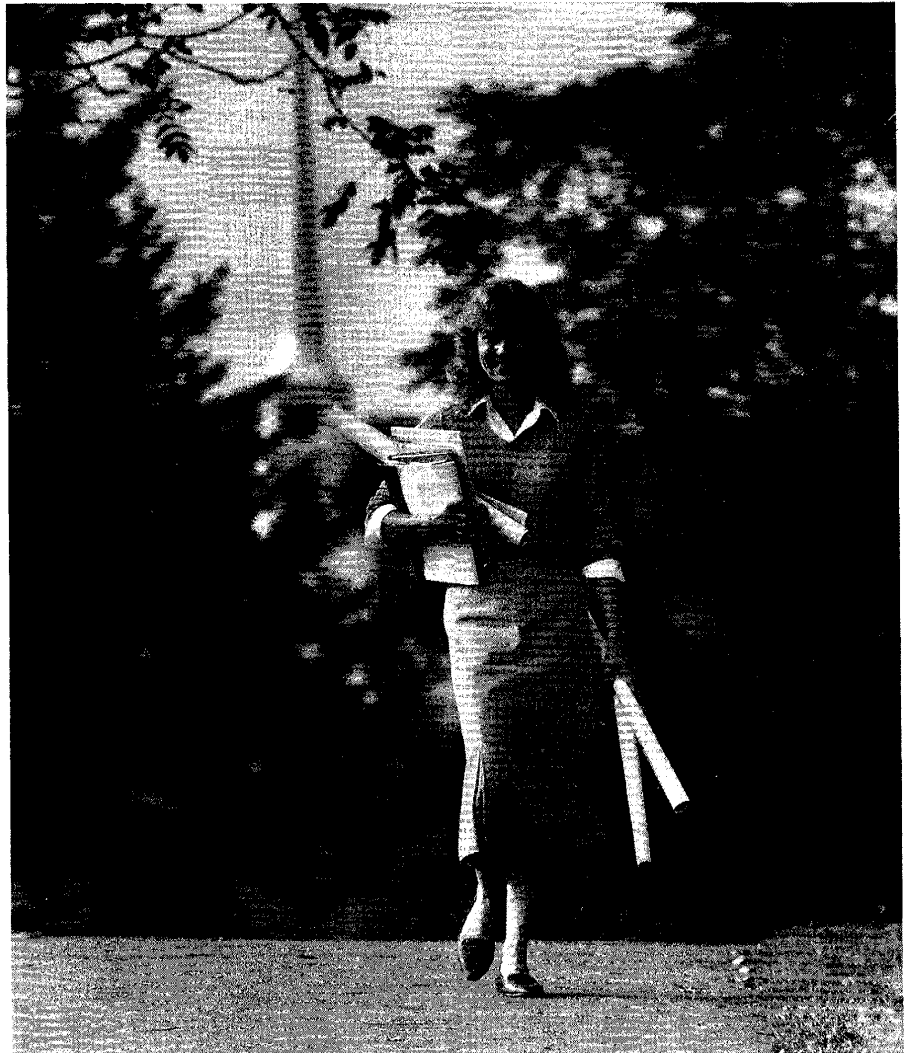
project remained on hold until 1981, when the Long Range Planning Committee of the Stowe Area Association—the town's Chamber of Commerce—asked the selectmen to include on the town meeting ballot a request for \$10,000 to hire a bike path coordinator. The town meeting approved; the idea was to find a willing candidate for the job at a princely \$5,000 a year.

### ***The Lusk Factor***

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Enter Anne Lusk, the woman who would prove herself not only the visionary and exponent but the planner, the implementor, the champion, and in time the national voice for the Stowe Recreation Path. Lusk had spent a girlhood near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in a set-

***Anne Lusk, the visionary and champion of the Stowe Recreation Path. She persuaded dozens of landowners to donate easements cost-free. (Photograph courtesy of Jeff Turnau, Stowe, Vermont)***



ting—as she would later recall—“of woods, salamander streams, violet fields, and caves to explore.” She had attended Ohio University in Athens and had lived at times in Japan and Morocco. A graduate in fashion design from France’s Les Ecoles de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne, she had received a master of arts in teaching, specializing in historic preservation, at the University of Vermont in Burlington and taught weaving there. She decided, after working for a while as a fashion model in New York City in the early 1970s, to try out being a Stowe ski bum for a season.

The season would turn out to be a long one (but she was only briefly a ski bum). In Stowe, Lusk met a local tree surgeon who had come there from Connecticut. They married, had two children (a daughter and son), and settled down into normal family life.

Lusk also plunged into local civic activity. Just before the selectmen picked her as path coordinator, she had completed—as a volunteer—a town project to convert the old Stowe school into the town library and art center. Everyone had been impressed by her vigor and persistence in the job. Choosing between a professional planning and engineering firm on the one hand and Lusk on the other, the selectmen cannily figured they would get more for less by picking Lusk. The price of \$5,000 a year, for two years, matched anyone’s idea of New England frugality.

Lusk is blonde, attractive, dynamic. To an outsider, she seems to have outshone any and everyone else involved with the path, but no fast-talking blonde is going to get the selectmen and other seasoned figures of a New England town—even a sophisticated town like Stowe—to undertake a project as important as the recreation path unless she has taken extraordinary care and thought to lay a foundation, personal and political, with the local establishment.

Lusk’s initial task, it would turn out, entailed persuading twenty-seven of Stowe’s property owners to donate, *cost-free*, easements for the path’s initial 2.7-mile stretch (the first chunk beginning in Stowe Village and starting up the Mountain Road); to raise close to \$300,000 through a mixture of local contributions and federal funds; and to reassure selectmen and townspeople alike, at each step, that the Stowe Recreation Path was something they all wanted and would continue to support.

It is instructive to note what Lusk did *not* do in this process.

She did *not* plunge into immediate surveying and construction work on the path nor did she launch an early fund-raising campaign. Instead, she spent a full year publicizing—chiefly through a series of articles in the *Stowe Reporter*—the multiple benefits that could flow to Stowe through a quality path. The project, she emphasized repeatedly, would surely be for recreation but it would accom-

plish much more—preserve open space, undergird the town’s social fabric, provide a method of safe and affordable transportation, and make all parts of the town more accessible to citizens.

By the time the year of publicity was completed, the Stowe Recreation Path had begun to take on an apple pie and motherhood image—a project of potential, multiple benefits for everyone in town.

Lusk did *not* take any early steps that might have been threatening to individual landowners. She laid out no specific, detailed route for the path. She simply identified, with stars on a map, the points she would like to see connected—Main Street, the elementary school road that also connects to the high school, and the like. Early on, she promised no land would be taken by eminent domain.

What she *did* do was ask each landowner to walk with her along the potential route:

I had in my hand a map with stars, and told each landowner I was just looking for a way to connect those stars. I did not say—“Can I have your land?” Instead, I showed each owner a blank map with pencil marks that could be erased. The landowner was invited to draw, with a pencil, the way the path might go through their land. No one, I told each owner, knew their land as well as they did.

What’s more, I was grateful and contented with their worst land—along the edge of a cornfield, behind a dump, along the edge of river where we’d have to stabilize the rocks, sometimes a tree line “out back” that they never saw.

The operation was especially sensitive because a refusal *by any one owner* could have scotched the entire process and because a decision was made early on: No landowner could or would be paid cash for his or her land. If that had happened, each other person uncompensated might easily have felt that they had been taken.

What landowners were asked to sign was a deed of easement—a deed that Lusk, having gotten herself notarized, carried around with her to pick up instant signatures as agreements were obtained. (For the landowners, the density provisions of the Stowe zoning ordinance, allowing a specified number of units per acre, were a real concern. The agreement reached was that easements made for the recreation path would not be reduced from the total acreage reckoning used as a basis for a landowner’s future development rights. In return, landowners received no town tax reductions for their recreation path land easements. For the town, there were no tax implications in these transactions—although a number of landowners subsequently obtained federal tax deductions for the value of their easements.)



The most effective point in getting landowners to grant easements, Lusk found, was the idea they were making a contribution of real value to their town—creating a path their children and their friends would come to enjoy:

But it took lots of talking. I spent three months with one family farm, to get an easement. Three times a week, for three months running, I was out in their barn, wearing grubby jeans, just hanging out. They were the last people and also the biggest stretch of property. A deadline came up on which we'd lose a bundle of cash from the Federal Land Water and Conservation Fund if I didn't have all the easements completed. So I went to one brother in the barn, pleaded with him to sign. He said he would if his brother out at the woodpile would. I went to the brother at the woodpile and he agreed. So one signed, then the other.

Parallel to all this, Lusk had to work assiduously on the fund-raising front. The construction cost for the first phase of the path would be close to \$300,000. Claire Lintilhac contributed \$84,000—in a sense, a bittersweet story because she and her family firmly insisted the gift be anonymous; thus, Anne Lusk could never meet and personally share her enthusiasms and plans with the woman responsible for conceiving the path idea in the first instance.

Claire Lintilhac would die in the mid-1980s, between the completion of the first segment and planning for the second. While her own first vision had been for a safety pathway immediately beside the Mountain Road, her son Philip Lintilhac now agrees it was fortuitous that the path eventually took a less direct route, becoming “an integral part of the Stowe community” through its recreational uses. The scale and sharp turns of the route that was eventually selected, he noted, “discourage the high-speed bicycle racers who prefer the main road anyway.” Town administrator Paul Hughes notes the idea of a pathway along the Mountain Road's shoulder proved impractical because the traffic is so heavy, driveways numerous, and snow plowed onto the shoulders during the winter.

The town was prevailed upon to make \$42,000 in federal general revenue sharing money available for the project. A total of \$118,000 was received in Land Water and Conservation Fund monies. Then there was the \$53,000 that had to be raised in small local contributions—Lusk's toughest fiscal challenge. She solved it through such imaginative fund-raising techniques as “selling off” parts of the path. For a \$2 contribution, one could buy an inch, for \$15 a foot, for \$45 a yard—and on up through rods, chains, and links to the largest private contributions. The contributors are now acknowledged in a plaque at the start of the path.

On the second segment of the path, completed later in the 1980s,

the \$380,000 total was shared among similar sources—\$50,000 from the Lintilhac family, \$20,000 from revenue sharing, \$60,000 from the Federal Land Water and Conservation Fund, \$130,000 in private contributions. By now, confidence in the project was growing so robustly that the town pitched in \$120,000 of its own tax revenues.

All the while, Lusk was setting up support committees—of land-owners, potential supporters, flower planters, indeed, support committees for any and all special purposes. The Stowe Rotary Club, an enthusiastic backer of the path from the start, cites numerous other local organizations that provided significant support, among them the Stowe public schools, the Stowe Winter Carnival Committee, the Stowe Cooperative Nursery, the Stowe Area Board of Realtors, and the Stowe Area Association, “which rightfully saw the major benefit the path could provide to the resort-based community.”

How does Lusk believe she made it all work?

First of all, there’s the advance publicity, so that the minute you’re ready to go out to your community, most of the critical questions have been raised—and answered.

You have to make sure your own personality doesn’t get in the way. For example, when I have joint meetings on the path, I will always have it in a comfortable home setting. Not set up chairs like a board of directors and audience. You need an informal roundtable feel.

I craft the setting—constantly quote peoples’ good ideas, and give them credit for their good ideas. The idea is to keep rewarding peoples’ good ideas, encouraging the discussion.

Especially when you’re dealing with town officials, try not to give them a “yes” or “no” choice. Instead, go with three options—all of which you like. People like to have a choice. The minute they have a choice, they’ll pick one of your alternatives. Then it becomes their idea.

If there ever is a chance you’ll be told “no,” I tell them before the meeting ends that I’ll be sending them more material.

My technique is to come in talking dumb but with a full group of options. As you hear objections/problems, promise to go look for some solutions. The minute they get a tiny grain of their idea in there, the more they are for it. Every opportunity you can give to Selectmen, or other influential people to make suggestions, gives power to you. Is that manipulation? No, it’s just how you work through human nature.

You must be a facilitator, moderator, or shuttle diplomat. But you’re not The Leader. You’re a pied piper, or gentle ringmaster. You have to keep reminding yourself: the true leadership and ideas come from consensus.

Some people believe Lusk was *too* strong-handed and did not take enough time to form a sponsoring group as enthusiastic as she, but the broader sentiment seemed to be that Lusk, in fact, sought to share decisions and share credit with others whenever she could.

What everyone appears to agree on is that without her perseverance, her strength of personality, the Stowe Recreation Path might well never have come to pass.

Could Lusk have made the process a more “democratic” one, in which the townspeople themselves were more engaged in the design and execution of the path? Could the whole town have been “bought in” more to the entire planning process?

The question is not easily answered but Lusk, when we asked, offers this response:

A committee might undertake this big a project. But then you have to delegate—one person who writes, one who fund-raises, one who designs, one who gets the deeds of easement. But you still need one name to receive the ideas, to have the mailing address. You need an individual to relate to, who really cares, who knows the whole issue—for example, Lady Bird Johnson with her passion for wildflowers along America’s roads. People elsewhere can relate to Anne Lusk, with portable typewriter from high school, salary of \$5,000 a year. So other people know it can be done quite simply. Committees don’t inspire other people. People inspire other people. Sometimes the only thing I sell is enthusiasm.

The community leader who is tempted to play dictator on a project, Lusk notes, needs to understand that consensus is the one way to make his or her goal successful in the long run. Getting a project done is not a one-time thing. Unless there is a sense of ownership, of broad community participation, long-term maintenance of the project is sure to suffer.

### ***A New Pathway, Step-by-Step***

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Walking along the path site with landowners, letting them pencil in the route, was only one of multiple walks Anne Lusk had to make over the territory, again and again, before the Stowe Recreation Path could become a reality. There had to be a walk with an engineer to determine the feasibility of each piece of the route\*; then with a tree surgeon, marking every tree to come out, every one to stay; next with the bulldozer operator, guiding him each step; then she marked the path’s curves with spray paint, walking ahead of the grader to dissuade him from his usual straight lines.

A lot of the design work, Lusk recalls, had to be done solo—it

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\*The engineering, even of a recreation path, requires major attention. The engineer hired, William Kules of Stowe, was obliged to develop rather exact construction plans and acquire a whole range of necessary local, state, and federal permits. He then oversaw the construction phase and prepared an “as-built right-of-way plan” for recording easement acquisitions.

is tough to take a town of 3,200 inhabitants with you step-by-step through the woods, but whenever people were with her on the site, from bulldozer operator to engineer, she encouraged their participation. “Because,” Lusk suggests, “there are a lot of judgment calls, at the moment, and aesthetics by consensus may have the broadest long-term appeal.”

What effect was she trying to create? She replies:

A rhythm and alteration of views. The path is intended to be slow-paced, to give people private rooms to walk through, to give them surprises—from practically no view to the most spectacular, from a beautiful Vermont farm to a dumpster. From shade to sun, dappled trees to farm field, brook to mountain. I think it’s because people are reacting to a constantly changing setting, they also react to other people on the path.

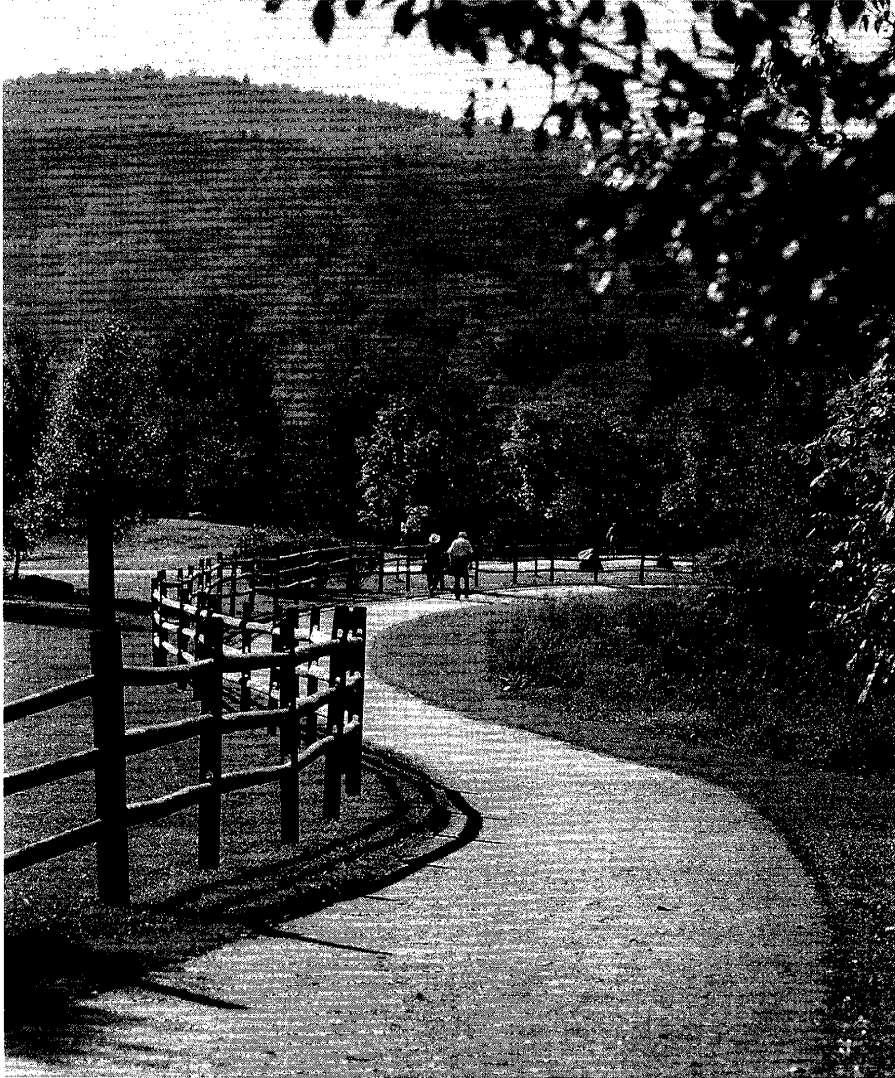
Tree selection was critical—a mix of hemlocks and sugar maples for bright hues of fall leaves on the pathway, for example. The overhead canopy is “carved” to make sure blocks of sun hit the path:

You have dappled sunlight. You have solid shade. You make people come blinking out of dark forest into the full sunlight. Then you tease them back into the woods. You surprise them with a shot of a stream. And you take their breath away with the view of mountain.

One of the most charming elements of the path is its closeness to the West Branch River—indeed, the path crosses the river ten times, the result of landowners’ various wishes that at first had seemed a cost burden but in time has turned out, with the visual interest of the bridges, to add variety and interest to the walk. *Water* turns out to be one of the Stowe Recreation Path’s most stunning assets. The town is legitimately enjoying the recovery of views and use of a river that for many decades had been ignored and relegated to farmers’ and a few residents’ backyards, oftentimes hidden behind layers of scrub growth, mostly on private property.

Through the river, the Stowe Recreation Path reintroduces the sounds and flashing light of water into peoples’ daily lives. Water becomes company—a companion, even when one is alone on the path. The water is there to reflect moods of weather, provoking new human reactions as the seasons, light, the clouds shift. It reveals itself in an infinitely more immediate, delight-inspiring fashion for pathway walkers and bikers than motorists could ever expect to experience.

Lusk thinks it is important that town greenways go somewhere—that they do not simply peter out, as if the funding had suddenly run out. The Stowe Recreation Path, for its part, starts right



*“The path is intended to be slow-paced,” says Anne Lusk, “to give people private rooms to walk through.” (Photograph courtesy of Jeff Turnau, Stowe, Vermont)*

in the middle of Stowe Village, close to picturesque broad fields and a stunning church steeple view, and it *does* go someplace—it ends up at Stowe’s Brook Road, with the riverbed and a covered bridge at the end. A circle of benches, a parking lot, a group of picnic benches, and a view are the kinds of element one should seek for any path’s end, Lusk suggests.

The “furniture” and amenities along Stowe’s path—the benches, signs, parking areas, road intersections—have been fairly characterized as “austere.” They are well placed, the benches for example commanding some of the premier views. Stunning views there are along this pathway—church steeples, a collection of splendid old barns, broad meadows where cows graze, groves of trees, the riverscape, and Mount Mansfield.



***The path crosses the West Branch River ten times. The water, once visible to only a few farmers and landowners, has become an asset shared by all.*** (Photograph courtesy of Nancy Cohn, Stowe, Vermont)

There is a certain austerity to the overall design; it reflects not just the Vermont parsimony but Lusk's aversion to anything save a fairly unostentatious "people's path" through the town. There is an unobtrusive sign on Main Street indicating the path's start. The Mountain Road itself offers peekaboo glimpses of the path—a deliberate effort to stimulate tourists' interest—but this path, insists Lusk, "is supposed to be casually found, like a surprise, a delightful sidewalk. We don't want to hawk it as if it were a waterslide or some other gimmicky tourist attraction."

Not that everything went according to plan. Originally, as town administrator Hughes recalled, a series of quite attractive, supposedly theft-proof signs were placed along the path, but "people took tools to the path to steal the signs. Plainer signs of painted plywood have been installed and not stolen."

The path seems to welcome peoples' own additions, and it is easy to sense growing town ownership of the path. Various groups of citizens, from kids to church groups, have planted beds of flowers along the path and maintain them. Lusk has even had people work-

ing with her on wildflower beds. All sorts of unplanned uses have evolved—for instance, places where kids have their tree houses or have discovered summertime watering holes ideal for a quick dip.

### ***Where Else?***

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Is the Stowe Recreation Path a special, very *unique* event in American city and town planning? In one sense, it is not. All sorts of other communities across the nation have—and are increasingly constructing—greenways and recreation paths connecting foot networks of one type or another.

The 1987 Report of the President's Commission on Americans Outdoors endorsed the concept: "We recommend communities establish greenways, corridors of private and public recreation land and waters, to provide people with access to open spaces close to where they live, and to link together the rural and urban spaces in the American landscape."

Little matter that the Reagan administration's Council on Environmental Quality subsequently expunged the word "greenway" from the final official report, the excuse being that greenways can be "mechanisms for land use planning, restricting growth or regulating development." With or without the political ideologues' approval, the movement is catching on. Across the nation, there are said to be some five hundred greenway projects in place or under way.

One of the most exciting is the Brooklyn/Queens Greenway, which by 1995 will link Brooklyn's great parks, running forty miles from the Atlantic Ocean to Long Island Sound. It could even be outshone by the Ridge Trail, a four hundred-mile loop around the greater San Francisco Bay Area, of which seventy-five miles have already been completed.

There is the modest 1976 Bicentennial path that threads its way from downtown Bartelsville, Oklahoma, through woods, across streams, over hill and dale, to a terminus at a beautiful Frank Lloyd Wright-designed park. There is the Platte River Greenway close by the center of Denver; and Portland, Oregon, has its forty-mile loop, actually a 140-mile system of protected hiking and bicycle trails that traverse the forested hills and corridors of the Columbia and Willamette. Scheduled for completion sometime in the 1990s, the forty-mile loop trail skirts wetlands, makes its way through ravines and along ridge tops, and overlooks vistas and natural areas. Planning is currently under way to extend this greenway trail system to the

coast. The new “Greenway to the Pacific” will be a boom to human recreation as well as ensuring a protected pathway for wildlife.

Keith Hay, director of American Greenways in Arlington, Virginia, says the national push for greenways is “growing by leaps and bounds” and “is largely a citizens movement to make the places where we live and work more habitable and humane.”

*Common Ground*, a newsletter published by the Conservation Fund, declares:

Greenways are mysterious. They defy precise definition, but their very elusiveness confers magical qualities. Somehow they galvanize whole communities. The secret lies in their general characteristics: they’re green; they go somewhere; they form boundaries. Something deep in our species is drawn to such properties. To borrow a famous legal dictum: we may not be able to define the concept, but we know it when we see it.

The glory of the greenway rests, in fact, on its wonderful elasticity. Pull it this way, and it covers the natural contours of ridgelines and watercourses. Push it that way, and it incorporates the designed infrastructure of abandoned railroads and utility corridors. It fits the local context. Across the country, greenways are sprouting in astonishing diversity, each generating its own mix of costs, goals, leaders, timing, rationale, and scale.

Not surprisingly, with Stowe’s path completed, Lusk began attending conferences, prevailing on George Bush’s White House to declare the Stowe path one of his “thousand points of light,” evangelizing for the pathway idea across the nation.

Yet it is important to note what specially sets the Stowe Recreation Path apart from its myriad sister projects across the nation. Stowe’s uniqueness, one is led to conclude, lies not in its natural beauty or design (though it does well on both those fronts) nor is Stowe’s uniqueness limited to the enhanced sociability mentioned earlier in this chapter. The special contribution, rather, is its striking success as a town organizing principle. Here is a simple pathway that has begun to reorganize peoples’ lives, to wean them from overwhelming automobilized dependency, and to return them to a more human scale of settlement and living.

Anne Lusk recalls the movie *Picnic*, when backyards were not fenced; when youngsters skipped from one back screen door to another. She recalls the time when people socialized on the sidewalk and by visiting on front porches. She laments:

Now with fenced-in backyards, private barbecues, dangerous roads, and recreation facilities and elementary schools so far removed from the center of town—to socialize you have to receive or make a phone call, get into a car, and drive to someone else’s house. You’ve lost the spontaneous heart-warming sociability of a small town.



If a recreation path can be sited just right—connecting housing areas, schools, businesses, the main street, playing fields, and natural vistas—then, the Stowe example suggests, it can begin to reorganize peoples' lives. (Stowe even has a McDonald's right beside the path. The familiar arch sign is cut way down in size—no gaudiness in *this* town, of course—but what the McDonald's means is that kids, and many adults, can spend a full day on the path, stopping by for a snack when they need it.)

Provide a pathway, the Stowe experience shows, and in a society where it seems people scarcely exist if they do not have an automobile, the pedestrian and bike rider can again claim equal status. Stowe is finding that people drive to the recreation path, bikes mounted on their vehicles, and then drop off children to bike there for hours. Seniors often motor to the path so they can enjoy it.

What all this suggests is that a pathway has the potential of changing peoples' preferred place of residence—from outlying, essentially isolated locations to housing closer to the town center, surely closer to the recreation path. Is it too much to hope that strategically placed pathways could cut back on the "suburbanization" of America's smaller towns and cities, the phenomenon of people moving to locations farther and farther out of town centers, by their personal decisions inflicting great harm on the traditional town centers? Could pathways make towns more lively and help to save the roads between towns from creeping development that fills up and mars, like billboards, the natural landscape?

Only time will tell—the experience not just of a Stowe, with its strong planning ethic and its heavy pull of outside dollars, but the experience of more normal towns.

Are recreation paths appropriate for just "plain old places"? Lusk is convinced they are, and that the argument to get less affluent places to try paths is not to talk about jogging or lovely views or getting people close to flora and fauna but rather:

I would sell a path strictly as a safe route for their kids to get around town when mom and dad are working. Because both parents have to work in the summertime and kids can't get to the swimming hole or a friend's house because they have to be driven. Build a path and all children, all ages have a safe way to get around town, all year long. And it's as good as providing after-school and weekend activities.

And you don't have to do it all at once. In a town without a lot of money, it's OK to create just a dirt path. Use town equipment to remove topsoil, put down gravel from town supplies, and in ten years get to paving it. But get the permanent right of way. It's critical to have the path in the right location, and to have acquired the land.

In Stowe, Vermont, the path seems truly to have changed lives, especially for younger people. Suddenly, they are freed from exces-

sive dependence on those adult chauffeurs we often refer to as parents. Gone are the days of being isolated at home or riding one's bike in circles around the elementary school parking lot because it is too dangerous to venture out on the street. Now kids can go independently to hang out with their friends. They gang together on the path, boasts Lusk, "like swarms of bees." There have even been whole birthday parties on the path, with mothers bringing cakes and the kids their swimsuits for a dash to one of the watering holes on the river.

Is the model applicable in city neighborhoods, in urban areas where there is so much more fear of crime? The answer has to depend, of course, on the locality, on the path's route, on the interest and commitment of neighbors. One has to believe that if urban neighborhood paths are oriented, more and more, to connecting the vital areas—from stores to homes to schools to playgrounds—then their chances of success in rebuilding American community, creating a new common ground, will inevitably escalate.

*The path offers a change from the car culture. Providing kids independence and safety, it can free parents from the relentless role of chauffeur.* (Photograph courtesy of Jeff Turnau, Stowe, Vermont)



## ***Commentary: Stowe***

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**ANNE WHISTON SPIRN:** If the idea of the Rudy Bruner Award is to present models of success for others to learn from, then the Anne Lusk model is a very important one for community leaders to think about. We recently completed a report in Philadelphia, *Models of Success: Landscape Improvement and Community Development*, where we looked at necessary components for success in projects like this. One is clearly the key individual, but to sustain a project, that individual must be able to share success with others. We found that a person who cannot work with others may be able to initiate a project but the success will be limited.

**ROBERT SHIBLEY:** I think it is a troublesome model. Lusk's negotiations were one-on-one: property owner with Anne. Nowhere did the pressure of several property owners sitting together in a room come to grips with the notion that "If you'd give up this much more, the path would be this much better." Community action should be held in a forum where community consensus can be achieved. Because that didn't happen, the idea of this place is very much more beautiful than the reality of it.

**SPIRN:** The process may not have been ideal, but no one came in and said, "You must put the path here; we are taking this land by eminent domain."

**SHIBLEY:** But if property owners feel that they gave their land grudgingly—as opposed to feeling that they had made the first of a number of significant contributions to the quality of a shared environment—then the path will reflect that difference over time.

**SPIRN:** Megaprojects funded by a single source make it hard for individuals to see their own mark. Stowe was funded an inch at a time. Instead of hiring one landscape architect and someone to build, small groups had the opportunity to create small landscapes. Girl Scouts made a wildflower meadow. A lot of people feel ownership.

It was a monumental accomplishment, and it allowed Stowe to meet one of our other criteria critical for success: permanent ownership and control of the land. Many landscape improvement projects are done on land to which people have only temporary access. That makes the project vulnerable. Without that sense of ownership,

you lose what you have at Stowe: kids building tree houses or having birthday parties there.

But our report notes that good design is also a critical part of success.

**SHIBLEY:** There is no design in this path other than the somewhat serendipitous decisions made by Lusk walking around with landowners. The only vision was: There should be a path and it should be on the least valuable land, the land most likely to be donated. That's not a vision that necessarily creates a wonderful community backyard or reverses the front yard/backyard dynamic of a community. Stowe sends the message that the easiest way is okay instead of seeking the best way. That's not to deny that thirty-two separate land deals and sixty signatures were required to put this thing together. It was an act of will.

In this case, unfortunately, the process was the design. A better alternative is to recognize a set of technical and aesthetic understandings about, say, how a bridgehead meets the land on both sides or where flowers might be positioned to define a place for a bench. A bench and a wastebasket don't establish the definition of a place.

**SPIRN:** The path works as well as it does because it uses two extremely powerful archetypal features: One is water and the other is path. Think about the great social spaces, the boulevards of Paris, even Sunset Strip. These are places to see and be seen. They are movement, boundary, rendezvous, places to go without committing yourself socially. The ten bridges were originally seen as unfortunate because they increased the cost, but bridges are also an archetype. They pass over. They give you views from the center of the stream. They punctuate the path and provide a place to meet.

Anne Lusk is not a designer, but in her sequential description of the path, where she explains how one emerges from dark to light, from close-in views of flowers to broad views of mountains, she is articulating very good design principles. A path is more interesting if it's not all obvious. You know you're going somewhere but you get surprises along the way.

**SHIBLEY:** I don't believe the people of Stowe perceive this as their path. I think they perceive it as Anne's path. Will the flower gardens be maintained? Will people embellish and improve the path? Does everyone whose property backs onto the path feel the obligation to turn the place where the garbage cans are stored into something different? Is there a commitment to the place?

I think the answer is no. When I visited, the backs of buildings were not being remade to address the public thoroughfare to which

they were now exposed. You see the garbage and the parking lots. There isn't continuing pressure to improve the backs of buildings because the social infrastructure is not in place. Of course, improvements may still emerge.

**SPiRN:** The rough spots gradually can be transformed over time as people recognize that some parts of the path are more beautiful than others. Every project doesn't have to be "high design," though I am a fan of high design. If it's working, and transforming the way people meet each other, if it's giving children the experience of transforming their own community by their own actions, then that is an aesthetic of its own. The path can be appreciated as vernacular design.

Another factor contributing to the success of projects is having clearly defined goals. In Stowe, one stated goal was that the kids should get a safe place to ride their bikes. With goals like this clearly stated at the outset, you are in a position to look back and say, "Yes, we did it." And in Stowe, they did.