From a birds-eye view, Hartford, Connecticut appears to be made up of many different patches of a quilt. This quality has been embraced by a public/private urban design strategy organization called iQuilt. iQuilt helps connect more than 40 cultural and destination assets of downtown Hartford: museums, performance spaces, historic landmarks, modern architecture, and public art, through a strict lens of innovative walkability and creative placemaking.

The iQuilt plan is an integrated suite of projects ranging from enhanced transit stops to public gardens with flowing water bordered by shops and housing. Jackie Mandyck, Managing Director of the iQuilt Partnership, says walkability and other active forms of transit and mobility are at the heart of everything iQuilt plans and designs.

“We took on the challenge of becoming the walk Gods of Hartford. We had to ask, how do we start to get people on the street? Not just telling them to, but providing information for why they want to get outside and walk,” says Mandyck.

One of the defining features of iQuilt is it’s rich connectivity through partnerships, including relationships with CTtransit, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT)-owned bus service, and Hartford Business Improvement District (BID). One of the main goals of transit-walkability collaboration is to knit the iQuilt mission with making transit cool again, while enhancing economic vitality in downtown. Jordan Polon, Executive Director of Hartford BID, says it too focuses on projects that provide cleanliness and safety, marketing, placemaking, and beautification, with the shared goal of enhancing quality of life in the district.

"The public space enhancements and improvements spearheaded by iQuilt over the years continue to provide fertile ground for tangible increases in public space activation", says Polon.
The birth of iQuilt stemmed from the near loss of the historic Bushnell Theatre, the largest, most notable performing arts center in Connecticut. In 2007, there was a major proposal to build an obstructive state office building right across the street which likely would have closed down the theatre. The plan fell through, but it was a wake-up call to the network of cultural organizations in Hartford that they needed to chart their own destiny to secure a more holistic sense of permanence, protection, and vitality. iQuilt was formed to tackle this challenge with gusto.

The question then quickly became about how to transform the city of Hartford into a place where people don’t want to necessarily walk into a building and hunker down, but want to share an experience out on the streets.

Part and parcel of the action needed to move forward with solutions to address walkability and empowering multi-modal transportation was securing funding resources — often a challenge for this area of work. iQuilt set out a plan to apply for grants and activate other funding opportunities made possible through their various partnerships.

In the end, iQuilt has taken on a much grander sense of this original sentiment, by making it their mission to protect and connect these important public spaces, but also to transform the entire experience of downtown Hartford. Here were the high-level solutions that a 200 page iQuilt plan laid out:

When it came to putting streets on road diets, installing bike lanes, or restructuring where the buses might do their changovers or where the bus stops are, etc., iQuilt knew they needed a great working relationship with transit. The general manager/CEO of CTtransit sits on the iQuilt board of corporators and provides active input.

“So if they raise their hand and say Jackie, we might want to sit down and talk about this, that's what we do”, says Mandyck.
Many milestones, small and large, have upgraded downtown Hartford to a Bronze Level Bike Friendly Community and a Silver Level Walk Friendly Community (Mandyck’s Walking Action Plan, via the America Walks Walking College), among other notable achievements in promoting active transit, while creating a superb sensory experience for those who work, live, and play in downtown.

IMPACTFUL IMPROVEMENTS

- A Complete Streets Task Force that focuses on making the community more bike and walk friendly
- $10 million TIGER grant for a green walk, connecting the capital to the riverfront
- Larger promenades: transforming 4 ft sidewalks to 19-23 ft public spaces for people to enjoy the community
- Improvements to bus shelters thanks to an energy grant
- Annual (2012-2016) creative placemaking pop-up Envisionfest Hartford
- ADA compliance advancements tracking in partnership with the state DOT

At the same time that these major milestones were in the works, non-profit bike shop BiCi Co stepped up to get more bike users thriving in the community. Limebike also showed up in the summer of 2018, transforming downtown Hartford in the blink of an eye.

Knitted into the experiences above is one of iQuilt’s initial goals, to instill in folks that riding the bus can truly be cool again. At Envisionfest Hartford, iQuilt invited CTtransit to park one of their buses onsite at the event, where hundreds of people come out to experience a dreamland of place and walkability. Mandyck recalls, “We took our local improv group and turned the bus into a theatre... and just let it sit there and they performed shows on the bus.”

iQuilt is pushing for funding to support more fun ideas like having different artists perform on the bus. They’ve also applied for a grant to install solar energy panels on bus shelters, to make the spaces more dynamic and safe.

But the biggest success since iQuilt began digging into their plan is the partnerships with both the public entities, CTtransit, Hartford BID, the state, the transportation department, the city of Hartford, and with other private groups, like non-profits, corporations, local businesses, local property owners, to make downtown the "shared living room" for all citizens of Greater Hartford.
AN ACTIVELY THREADED FUTURE

In the coming years, downtown Hartford appears poised for the gold with iQuilt’s strategic stitching of transit-walkability and the exceptional connectivity to cultural assets and creative placemaking.

"These improvements provide our community with a solid framework for continued innovation in raising the profile of walking, biking and public transportation," says Polon.

Other advantageous growth changes are afoot. Last fall, the University of Connecticut moved their branch campus downtown, downtown living is significantly on the rise, a Double-A baseball park was built, a new soccer stadium will open in 2019, and a recent 9-mile dedicated busway downtown all combine to create a dynamic for increasing ridership, walking, and everything in between. The excitement in Mandyck's voice is clear when she describes the shifting tides.

“It’s a sea change. I often believe that this doesn’t happen overnight. You've got to start to change people's thoughts and desires. Had I taken a snapshot ten years ago, five years ago, today, then in five years to come — it's amazing how far we have come.”

Larger promenades, enhanced public green spaces, and upgraded public transit all contribute to Downtown Hartford’s walkable revival.

America Walks is a nonprofit national organization empowering communities to create safe, accessible, and enjoyable walking conditions for all.