Title

The Minneapolis Riverfront: Vision and Implementation   [Review]

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Vision and Implementation Richard Scherr

Top: Downtown Minneapolis, with riverfront zone at the upper left. Above: Victor Caliandro leads a public discussion. Photos courtesy Cuningham Group.

There are times when the forces of capital and market are unable, by themselves, to generate the vision and initiative necessary to sustain urban development. This is true for urban waterfronts, which have lost much of their economic vitality through the shifting of nineteenth-century industries to newer technologies and alternate locations. The result is a proliferation of deteriorated waterfronts, full of rundown, empty buildings and vacant spaces devoid of human activity — zones that prevent central cities from benefitting from their natural edges.

Minneapolis Riverfront: Vision and Implementation documents a planning process intended to inspire new vision and initiative for a stretch of the Mississippi River at the edge of downtown Minneapolis. This area was once one of the largest water-powered industrial districts in the world. Now, most of the factories and warehouses are demolished, leaving a dispersed

smattering of isolated commercial buildings, a residential tower and the Metrodome, surrounded by blocks of parking.

The planning process was initiated by the Cuningham Group, a private Minneapolis architecture firm. Cuningham solicited design proposals from teams in the U.S. and Europe, then organized an ad hoc committee of public officials, planners, business leaders and developers "to seek out innovative ideas and develop a basis for their implementation." The publication documents fourteen design responses and summarizes the committee's initial responses as a series of values and goals to guide further planning.

The sponsors wanted to encourage the widest range of possibilities and opportunities for redevelopment, so programming, budget and development constraints were minimal. To that end, they were most successful: taken together, the proposals constitute a diversity of concepts and techniques that offer a summary of the state of urban design today, showing both the potentials and limitations of current thinking about transforming cities.

The proposals share a common outlook. They all posit the city as a physical, cultural and spiritual artifact, tied to a specific place and time. They unabashedly advance physical visions that evoke the nature, spirit and qualities of the place to be developed — particular programs, buildings, landscape, circulation and other features to be implemented on certain blocks and defined in three dimensions (or, at least, plans with projected shadow). Some even suggest the type of inhabitant or culture that would reside in or visit such a place.
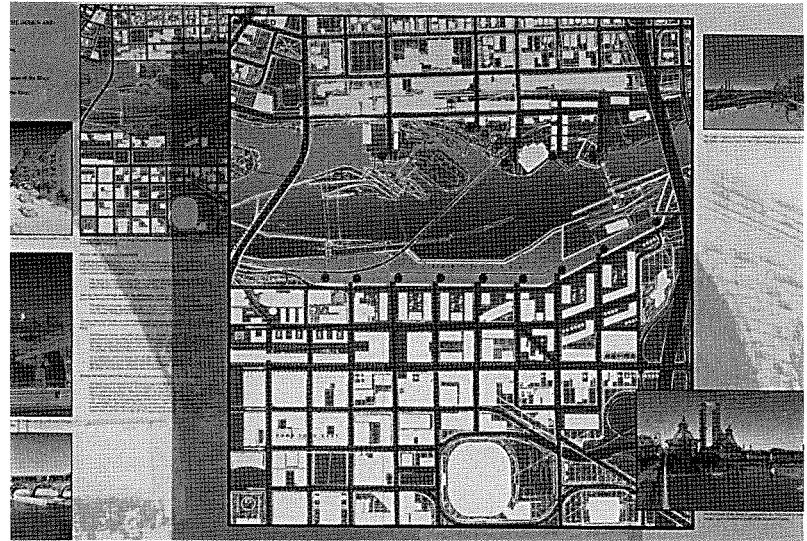
But as a group, they reveal a fundamental rift within the urban design profession. Many are dominated by large-scale urban design structures, public landscape orders that define a context for private projects (Jo Coenen and Co., Lee Weintraub, Frederick Bentz/Milo Thompson/Robert Rietow). While this is a valid approach to estab-

lishing urban form, one used throughout the twentieth century, it is often too open-ended and generic, leaving critical physical qualities and programming for particular places undefined.

Other proposals set out specific concepts for physical redevelopment, representing actual architectural forms (reflecting specific programs and spaces) that can be replicated to create a larger urban form (Ralph Rapson and Associates). The problem with this group is that it tends to overly design the city, which can limit both the flexibility needed in market-generated development and the richness and diversity of loosely controlled development that occurs over time.

The central issue was how should one relate to, or connect to, the riverfront, both in terms of form and circulation, and here another revealing dichotomy emerged. The most common approach (although advanced by less than half the proposals) was simply filling in the voids between the CBD and the waterfront with new development — bringing the city and the grid to the river. These proposals played by the traditional rules, as it were, trying to restore the dense, nineteenth-century block and street fabric.

But these proposals all depend on a standard, general mix of commercial – housing – retail fabric to complete the open blocks. While the notion of mixed uses, a living – working neighborhood, is to be applauded, one wonders whether there will ever be adequate demand to spark such development in areas like this without major public improvements, such as municipal incentives to attract new business (Rapson) or new transit systems. Typically, the commercial and residential market has moved elsewhere — although Min-

neapolis planners claim that the downtown is now primed for new development.

An equally strong impulse was, "If you can't bring the city to the waterfront, then bring the waterfront to the city!" Most of the schemes were subtractive, proposing significant interventions of new open space and landscape systems. Numerous themes were expressed: stretching linear parks parallel to the river (Coenen), extending a finger of park perpendicularly from the river into the city, and expanding the river park right up to downtown, leaving existing buildings and the Metrodome as islands in a sea of green (Cavaluzzi). "Voiding the city," as it were, is currently a popular urban design theory, with a lineage reaching back to the days of urban renewal and including the current thinking of Rem Koolhaas, Bernard Tschumi, Michael Sorkin and other proponents of recent modernist planning.
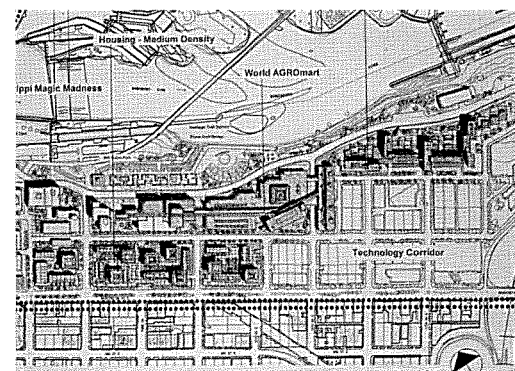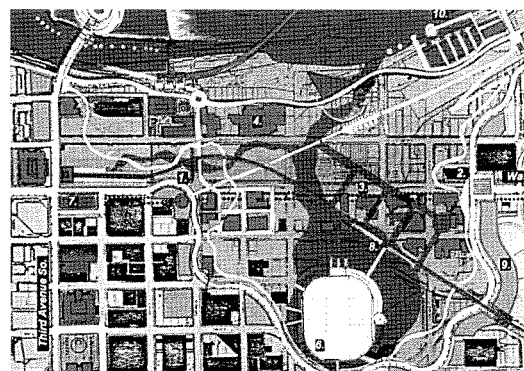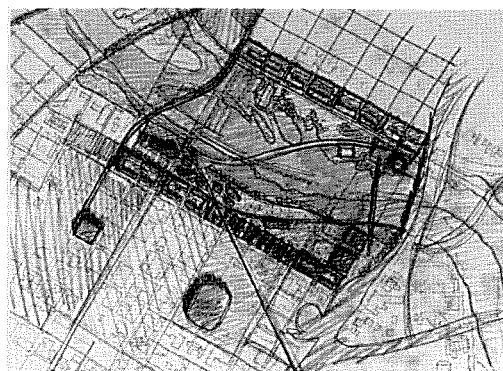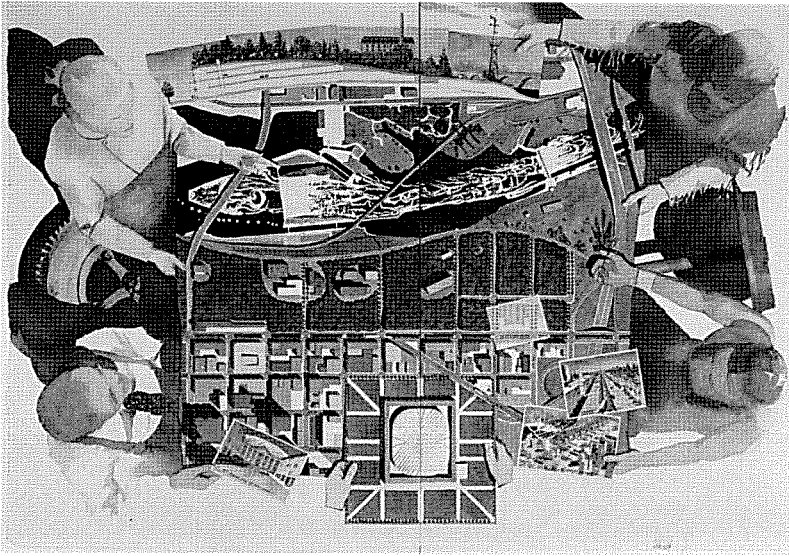
Proposal credit:
Lee Weintraub, Richard Hoyen
(illustrator), New York.

Here, the logic seems to be that given a river-front with an existing park (good), we can some-how make more of it (better) and reduce the underutilized, dilapidated (bad) city. Developers haven't been attracted to the waterfront, and even the healthier downtown area is a hard sell these days. What do we need, or, better still, want? The answer is, of course, open space for leisure activi-ties — places to enjoy ourselves, play, be healthier, safe, quiet and calm. These proposals suggest that to save the city, we must green it or subur-banize it, in the tradition of the garden city move-ment, and are by and large skillful and convincing, despite the threat they pose to the traditional urban qualities of the historic city.

In many cases, the most inventive ideas relate to programming, which is especially critical in making the waterfront vital, active and economi-cally sustaining. Many proposals hinged on critical catalysts that could spur development over time. One suggested a "World AGROmart" trade center and a "Mississippi Magic Madness" glass-enclosed cultural and entertainment center along the riverfront (Rapson). Others elaborated the notion of recreational or entertainment theme parks into a more comprehensive urban narrative of programmed events, such as a water theme park or a sports and entertainment district (Cavaluzzi).

These proposals suggest and accept a makeover of the city, sliding into the invented, simulated

urbanism that has played an increasing role in our culture since the 1960s. It is difficult to criti-cize the notion of the city as a theme park, given its ubiquitous presence; it is not only here to stay but also has asserted its own authenticity, and can be done well within its own rules.

But isn't it still possible to strive for authentic-ity, to play it simple, maintain the original natural amenities of the waterfront, and celebrate the remaining historical artifacts — such as buildings and the original St. Anthony's Falls — that connect to the city's actual past? Refreshingly, the last scheme in the book proposes "peeling back the layers of time," developing an interpretive land-scape, with fragments of the actual buildings, machinery, power stations and transport systems that existed on the site (Weintraub).

The book's greatest value, perhaps, is to validate the power of an urban design process to develop an "awareness of opportunities" and clarify a vision of possible futures that can serve as a catalyst for action. But will it take such a radical shift in the nature of the existing city, as most of the proposals suggest, to make a viable transformation come about? Or can smaller, catalytic public improvements, which can main-tain the soul and authenticity of our urban culture, bring about a gradual revitalization over time?

Clearly, the proposals suggest that urban design continues to assert its role through the clarity and power of grand schemes rather than the incremental process of redevelopment. While stimulating to the eye, they also threaten to disengage the city from the critical continuity of memory and meaning.

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