What Design Problems Were Addressed?

When an urban design competition begins there is an official program document which states key community problems and goals. However, when the competition is over, the designers who entered the competition have usually discovered new aspects of the problem and new goals to be achieved. That is, it is only at the end of the design process, when the solutions are presented, that the full complexity of the design tasks can be appreciated.

Milwaukee’s competition was no exception — after an initial survey of the results, it seemed relatively self-evident that there were four major types of problems and associated goals addressed by the competition entrants. These problems and goals are described below.

NEW IMAGES

The paramount problem addressed by the entrants in the Milwaukee Lakefront Competition is that of image — creating images, relating them to each other, and using them to induce satisfactory human behaviors, attitudes and experiences. This is always a problem in the design of an urban environment.

Images can make urban development a success or lead it to failure. For example, if new recreational facilities are remembered by people as "difficult to get to" or "unsafe" or "not for them" — regardless of whether these perceptions are true — such facilities probably will be unsuccessful. Similarly, if a developer thinks that buyers will perceive a new residential area as unattractive, then the developer’s investment is unlikely — regardless of whether the buyers’ perceptions are legitimate. Images of Milwaukee’s lakefront will influence how a wide variety of residents and visitors perceive the lakefront, the central business district and the entire city, how they use these areas, and whether or not they value them highly.

The images created by entrants in Milwaukee’s Lakefront Competition include, for example, large scale megastructures, suburban condominium villages, major waterfront promenades and carnival midways. The images used by the entrants can also be described in more abstract, architectural terms such as radial or concentric patterns, grids, curvilinear and natural forms, axes and symmetries, contrasts and harmonies, rhythms and textures.

Images can be separated and combined in various ways. The point here, is that strong, coherent images are fundamental to the vitality and longevity of urban areas. If Milwaukee’s lakefront had a
clear, meaningful image there probably would have been no need for a competition.

VISUAL LINKAGES: UNITING THE CITY AND THE WATER

A critical attribute of any new urban image is how it links together different aspects of urban life. Does it tie places together or create psychological barriers? Milwaukee’s Lakefront contains a critical meeting point — the intersection of Wisconsin’s most urban, intense central business district with its largest natural feature — Lake Michigan and its shoreline. This type of design problem is not unique to Milwaukee. Most major cities have grown around waterfront areas.

Traditional models for relating patterns of urban development to natural water systems are evident in the competition results. For example, many solutions created a place of arrival at the shoreline with a single grand plaza and a landmark, which in turn was connected to a major street or boulevard. Other solutions connected the urban pattern to the waterfront with a linear seam of plazas and buildings along the shoreline. One side of the seam is related to the water, the other side is related to the city.

Stylistically, some solutions adapted concepts from baroque and renaissance planning while others used more recent styles. The detailed analysis in Part III shows how similar design concepts were elaborated in different ways. Combinations of approaches were also evident. The point, again, is that the visual tie between the city and the entire waterfront is a critical design problem.

SOCIAL BENEFITS: PLURALISM AND PUBLIC ACCESS

However, public needs are complex, conflicting, and not always self-evident. The needs of today may not match those of subsequent generations. A design which emphasizes social benefits for one group at the expense of another is often impolitic and probably ineffective. Designs must aggressively encourage use of the lakefront by a variety of population groups for a variety of purposes.

Pluralistic use of the waterfront requires convenient physical access. But roads, parking lots, walkways and bus routes are not enough — they must be properly designed. In fact, if these elements are improperly designed they can obscure or discourage appreciation of the lakefront. It is the quality, not just the technicality of access which is critical. The physical activity of going to a waterfront should be pleasant, enjoyable and even fun.

Effective public access presumes that people have a reason to go the waterfront — that they will attach a net positive value to using new lakefront development. In North America the most active and accessible urban waterfronts have been those which carefully interweave private land development with well protected public spaces along the shoreline. Experiencing such waterfronts is not perceived as an independent activity requiring special effort. The waterfront becomes an integral part of day-to-day activities like shopping, commuting, dining, entertainment and regular business transactions. At the same time, the public spaces — the promenades, plazas, and parks — become special places beyond the ordinary routine of urban living.

The problems of land use and public access are mutually dependent. A waterfront plan with a few segmented and unrelated land uses will attract fewer types of people than one with a broad, integrated variety of uses.
Many competition entries mixed land uses and activities throughout the site. Even solutions which emphasized recreational land uses contained formal gardens, open fields, playgrounds,boating, skiing, restaurants, bandshells, swimming pools, theaters, museums, arenas, schools, tourist centers, campgrounds and a variety of civic buildings. Clearly, the large majority of competition entrants sought to increase public access to the waterfront for a broad, diverse set of social uses.

**ECONOMICS: INVESTMENTS, COSTS, REVENUES**

In Milwaukee, as in other cities, waterfront development requires public expenditures for construction and maintenance of roads, recreation facilities, landscaping, institutions, mass transit and parking facilities. At the same time substantial private investment is needed for new residential, commercial and industrial structures. At issue is whether design proposals have both public and private investment opportunities that will be financially feasible and yield satisfactory outcomes.

The potential for private development and the cost of public improvements are interdependent. For example, construction of a public parking facility is often used by cities to facilitate private commercial development. Legislative devices such as revenue bonds and the creation of tax incremental financing districts are also used by cities, including Milwaukee, to improve the feasibility of private development. But it may be difficult to attract private investments before public improvements are committed. Conversely, it is often unwise to commit public funds without prior assurances of private investment. For some cities this dilemma is insurmountable. For most cities it leads to protracted and complicated public and private negotiations.

There are two basic strategies for linking private and public investments — both are apparent in the competition results. In the first strategy, new private developments are placed along the lakefront, immediately adjacent to the central business district which already contains new and desireable real estate. Presumably there is a stronger existing market in this location which makes new commercial activities more feasible. These new commercial uses can generate tax revenues as well as attract more people to the area. The tax revenues can be used to build plazas and parks that draw even more people and make public places vital and exciting. Thus, existing opportunities for private development are used to leverage public revenues and social benefits.

The second economic strategy is to create entirely new options for development rather than build upon existing opportunities. This strategy often implies initially higher public and private investments. But it also implies greater long-term tax revenues. For example, many competition entries located major private and public investments near the lake or river, but away from the central business district. These new residential and commercial developments were often mingled with public improvements like marinas and parks. Presumably the public improvements would make the area more appealing to consumers and thereby increase the market for new development. Again, the interrelationships among public costs, private development, and ultimate social benefits were a major problem that is evident in almost all the competition entries.
FIGURE 1
FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

<table>
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<th>SPATIAL ZONES</th>
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<th>VISUAL LINKAGES</th>
<th>SOCIAL BENEFITS</th>
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FIGURE 2
THE FOUR SPATIAL ZONES