AESTHETIC IMPROVEMENT OF METROPOLITAN RIVERS

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The purpose of this paper is to provide follow up information regarding an urban river tourism-recreation study performed in 1971. The study documented, for the first time, the use and management of the San Antonio River Walk as a major tourism-recreation attraction.

THE RIVER WALK--A NEW, OLD SITE

What is now known as the River Walk (Paseo del Rio) was once a typical city core vacuum where no one would wish to go for fear of bodily harm. However, through the vigilance of the Conservation Society as early as 1924, the landscape features, including huge cypress and many semitropical plants, were kept from being destroyed by engineers wishing to fill in the waterway. Since that time, several plans have been proposed and partially implemented by leading citizens, the Chamber of Commerce, architects, park planners and others. One phase, the construction of bridges, walks and waterway retaining walls, was completed in the 1930's with WPA help. With the threat of flooding eliminated by building control dams and a flood waterway nearby, and with the impetus of a world's fair in 1968, the River Walk soon developed into a major leisure attraction. It now provides a very pleasant esthetic experience and a relief from
downtown congestion for over three million people a year. Furthermore, it has reversed the trend of abandoning the city center as a viable social and economic location. It is only about 4x6 blocks in size, includes a horseshoe bend in the San Antonio River, and is lined with both park-like setting and small businesses oriented to food service, lodging and entertainment. Its greatest growth and importance has come about since 1968.

A STUDY IN 1971

With support from the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station and the Texas Water Resources Institute, a study was begun to investigate three things: a general overview of waterfront development in cities; a landscape analysis of the River Walk and a survey of users and managers of the River Walk. The study design included a brief survey of cities in the United States, inspection and evaluation of landscape characteristics of the River Walk, a year-round survey of users, a survey of San Antonio voters and surveys of property owners and River Walk managers.

Waterfront Development

The brief study of cities across the United States revealed that a few were experiencing a renaissance of waterfront development and some had plans for redevelopment but most were not yet aware of the esthetic and recreational potential of their urban waters. In fact, many waterfront properties were degraded to the point that they seemed to have little potential. Some new development such as for storage of building materials or parking, in no way realized the great potential of this natural resource asset. Certainly, there was no match for the appealing and usable waterfronts of older European cities, much as Vienna, Amsterdam and Paris.

Landscape Analysis

The landscape of the River Walk appeared to break into four distinct
but integrated parts. The two legs of the river horseshoe bend were quiet, pleasant landscaped walkways. The base of the U was more active, containing shops, restaurants, night clubs and hotels. During Hemisfair an extension was excavated toward a new convention center complex. This was dominated by the surrounding architecture and had no shops or businesses. It was too new for the landscape development to have matured. The landscaped portion of the river running northward was pleasant but did not have the character of a node, such as in the horseshoe bend.

Visitor Survey

A year-around study, including interviews of visitors revealed some interesting characteristics. It was found that the use was much more diverse than for most city parks. Over 74% were from outside the area and 62% had been there before, indicating the building of a reputation as a desirable attraction. The visitors supported the perception of the four landscape zones. Most came to the River Walk for a stroll, to relax and some for shopping, inasmuch as many shops surround the River Walk area. Many came to dine, for entertainment and to visit the several festivals held throughout the year.

The only physical use of the water is by means of specially designed tour boats and the rental of paddle boats. The survey indicated strong support and use of the boats but about 10% did not like the idea of the boats. Strangely enough, in spite of the great number of visitors each year, several indicated that solitude, a chance to be by yourself in such a busy city, was the greatest value received. The design allows many places to sit and relax even though close to masses of people. Some comments included: "Trees, quiet, nature—feel more at home than anywhere else." "Keeps human proportions, not regimented; not a national park but commercial and natural; takes
into account human activities—dining, night life, relaxing, fact is downtown but completely divorced from city."

Voters Survey

While it was important to discover that the River Walk provided such overwhelming satisfaction among the visitors, there was no assurance that the citizens of San Antonio cared very much about this feature of their city. Therefore, a representative sampling of the voters was made and proved beyond any doubt that they were avid supporters of this feature even though it was patronized heavily by outsiders.

Some highlights of the survey included: 98% had visited the River Walk and 75% believed it to be of personal value to them (not just of general benefit to the city as a tourist attraction). However, the voters were not as convinced of the personal safety of the River Walk—only 47% considered it safe to be there (still remembering it before the Park Rangers reduced the crime rate to virtually nothing). Because of the local rumors against the concept of adding branches to the River Walk, particularly to the Alamo, the voters were asked about such a new channel. It was a surprise to discover that some 55% favored such a linkage with this state shrine. Only 43% thought that the river water was clean. This perception is primarily a visual one caused by occasional turbidity from runoff above San Antonio. Actually, the water contains no toxic materials. This should not prove that dirty water is sufficient for such a development—certainly, every one would prefer clear-appearing water if possible. Most striking, as an indicator of the civic pride for the River Walk, was the result of asking the question: "If another city wanted to develop a river, similar to the River Walk, how would you vote concerning a bond issue if you were a resident there?" 56% indicated that they would vote for such a bond issue, even if it would raise taxes.
Conclusions from Study

This study produced some results that were applicable to other cities and some only to San Antonio. Among the several conclusions drawn were:

1. The San Antonio River Walk is unique—physical characteristics, history, leadership. Therefore, it cannot be replicated literally in other locations.

2. In spite of being planned and developed by several agencies over a span of many years, it now acts as a unified whole.

3. In contrast to other typical city parks, it provides a diversity of function, including commercial facilities and entertainment.

4. A delicate balance between commercial and public development now exists. Even though the park interests might wish more park and business interests, more business places, the present use demonstrates the present balance to be about right.

5. There is no question that the River Walk is of both social and economic benefit.

6. It has served to stabilize the urban core, even stimulating new economic development there.

7. Rather than waiting for a single agency to be created to develop the River Walk, several agency leaders decided to give it guidance in collaboration.

8. Contrary to many city parks, this demonstrated that when properly planned, a city park can satisfy both outsiders and local citizens at the same time.

9. The study clearly documented extreme pride in this facility by all citizens of the community.

10. The San Antonio River Walk demonstrates that success does not depend upon extensive water resources— even a small amount can function.
FOLLOW UP

In an effort to follow up this study, in 1979 the site was revisited and key informants were interviewed. The purpose was to discover the changes that were taking place on the River Walk and the extent to which the evaluative planning research had been worthwhile. Some of the results follow:

1. Distribution of publications. The research study, Cultural Benefits from Metropolitan River Recreation—San Antonio Prototype, was first published in 3,000 copies. These were in such demand, and from all over the United States and several foreign countries, that the supply was exhausted within six months and a new printing was made. The interest in this study indicated that cities were looking for this kind of guidance.

2. Because of the limitations and uniqueness of the San Antonio River Walk, this study stimulated another study—a analysis of 100 city waterfront developments across the United States. This resulted in the bulletin, Development of Criteria for Evaluating Urban Settings for Tourism-Recreation Use. Among the results were the following guidelines for cities contemplating urban waterfront development:

- Motivating forces
- Organizational structure
- Existing development
- Flood protection
- Transportation and access

- Natural resources
- Cultural resources
- Economic/legal controls
- Overall concepts
- Project design

3. While the following developments are not directly the result of the studies, local testimony endorses their value in assisting financing and guidance in further expansion of the downtown area.

Over 100 buildings have been restored because of historic interest and are again in use.

Many new structures are being designed and built, oriented to the River Walk and in a style appropriate to the setting.
Many millions of dollars have been or are being spent on new hotels in the vicinity of the River Walk: Plaza National; Marriott (500 rooms); 168-room addition to La Mansion; new Hyatt Hotel; new retail space; 500-car parking garage.

HUD has awarded $455,000 to redevelop all electrical work under bridges for increased safety and esthetic improvement.

A $6.4 million urban development grant has been made to extend the river toward the Alamo and beside the new Hyatt Hotel.

A new bus system has been focused on the Alamo area which will be connected by plaza with the River Walk.

Much redevelopment of the King William area has taken place south of the River Walk.

Older hotels on the river are being converted into new apartment condominium and rental units.

The improvement of the River Walk has stimulated business office development near the area.

4. Some local testimony demonstrates the value of evaluation studies of planned developments:

Conclusions drawn by the study have no doubt encouraged additional business development...The document has been quoted by those seeking financing for commercial development in the private sector and by public entities in grant applications...Your conclusions and inferences have borne out. For example, the new development continues to be diverse in nature. Further, and very importantly, the river area has served as the great catalyst for downtown revitalization.

-- Claire Regnier, The Paseo del Rio Association

Because of the documentation in these research studies, other cities now have factual foundations for making urban waterfront development decisions. They have been extremely valuable to us in our consulting and planning work with many cities, both in Canada and the United States.

-- Robert Frazer, Groves, Fernandex, Frazer, Telford & Assoc., San Antonio

Recently, I was successful in changing completely the design orientation of a housing project in downtown Austin, near Town Lake. Because of the San Antonio report, I was able to demonstrate how the waterfront could be made into an asset rather than a liability.

-- David Reed, Recreation and Parks Department, Austin
CONCLUSIONS

Descriptive studies have value in aiding planning and management decisions, as exemplified by the study of the San Antonio River Walk. In this example, the amalgam resulting from decisions by several private and public agencies was studied to determine the extent to which it functioned as planned and as believed by promoters. Even though evaluation of such a study does not lend itself well to quantification, several measures of this study indicated that it provided useful information and acted as a catalyst for major decision-making. For the relatively small investment in research funding, it appears to have had multiple impact.