Toward the green city through revitalizing major obsolescent urban lands

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The author, an architect and urban designer, has played a leading role on a broad range of assignments in highly diverse urban settings in North America and Europe. Much of his work focuses on the rejuvenation of downtowns, waterfronts, neighborhoods, and campus master planning. His projects include the award-winning Saint Paul on the Mississippi Development Framework, the Brooklyn Bridge Park on the East River in New York, the East River waterfront in Lower Manhattan, the Fan Pier in Boston, the Southwest and Southeast Waterfronts in Washington, DC, the Vision Plan for Washington DC, Kendall Square and North Point/Lechmere Square in Cambridge, the Downtown Hartford Economic and Urban Design Action Strategy and the Downtown Master Plan for Fort Lauderdale. Current efforts include the "Big Picture for the Big Dig": the Rose Kennedy Greenway in Boston, the renewal of Regent Park, a major public housing project in Toronto; the implementation of the Convention District Master Plan in San Juan, P.R., and Urban Design advice for the Cincinnati Center City Development Corp (3CDC). In each city, with each project, his strategic, consensus-building approach has led to coordinated planning and a renewed focus on urban design. The text that follows is an edited and revised version of a paper presented at the international symposion on "The Natural City," Toronto, 23-25 June, 2004, sponsored by the University of Toronto's Division of the Environment, Institute for Environmental Studies, and the World Society for Ekistics.

Introduction

Obsolescent lands including urban waterfronts – seafronts, lakefronts, and riverfronts – and vast tracts of obsolescent port, industrial, railway, and warehousing lands have become the new frontier for cities with the potential for re-use. Typically these are underutilized or abandoned places from which the cities derived their prosperity and vitality, and notwithstanding their past degraded condition they have now become a locus of renewed vitality and potential.

In the mid 1990s, I first used the phrase "retreat of the industrial glacier" as a metaphor to describe two key concepts of urban regeneration – firstly, it is a long, slow process and secondly, it exhibits a certain inevitability. As the industrial glacier recedes, it reveals an extraordinary terrain of availability and a host of new possibilities. While there are enormous differences from place to place, there appear to be a number of common characteristics. There is an almost universal psychological desire to be near water and ravines, valleys and protected woodlands. The powerful allure of these great natural features draws people to them, wanting to live, work and recreate there. They offer respite from the pressures of city life, often in settings with a boundless or expanded horizon. Because of the centrality of these places, relating to the reasons the cities were founded there in the first place, they offer a great possibility for compact and more "sustainable" development, putting housing closer to workplaces with reduced travel times. For many city dwellers, the new frontiers and in particular waterfronts become the "resort" *in situ* for leisure in close proximity.

There are many examples that illustrate some of the dimensions of this process of cyclical transformation. Many of the obsolescent areas of cities that I am referring to were actually formed or occupied in the middle of the 19th century when the railways established themselves connecting to ports around the world in low-lying areas near bodies of water. A particular aspect that warrants recognition is the dissolution of the false dichotomy, both professional and conceptual, that divided the city from the natural world. Like many powerful and timely impulses, this reconciliation has had many sources: scientific, cultural, aesthetic. It is significant as an example of simultaneous discovery that was also necessitated by a sense of crisis as the environmental movement called attention to appalling degradation and its impact on people. Powerful symbols, such as the Cuyahoga River fire, created further awareness of the need for urgent action at all levels.

The change in consciousness has also been fostered by inspired practitioners and writers including Ian McHarg, *Design with Nature,* Ann Spirn, *The Granite Garden,* and Michael Hough, *City Form and Natural Process*. These three landscape architects devoted much of their work to the presence of nature in city form. Their ideas have opened possibilities for a new way of thinking beyond conventional mitigation and management of impacts to one based on new possibilities for creative synthesis. It is also based on the acknowledgment that humans are part of nature. Two relatively recent anthologies *Uncommon Ground*, edited by William Cronan, *Reinventing Nature*, edited by Michael Soule and Gary Lease, raise the question – what is nature and wilderness when it exists without influence or control by human society? To an extent nature everywhere on the planet has become a built environment which has been deeply altered by human interaction with it. In order to develop a vision of the future, it is necessary to understand the nature of the city, and how it functions as a home for the vast majority of people who live as urban dwellers.

Two quotes from Ann Spirn illustrate the need for understanding the relationship between the natural and built environments: "We need to move away from the persistent, common perception of the city as a degraded environment and wilderness as a pristine place untainted by human presence … We have to deal with cities as systems in which cultural processes create an environment that's decidedly different from undisturbed nature, yet united to it through the common flow of natural process." These ideas are also reflected in Jane Jacobs' most recent book and great synthesis of natural systems and economics, *The Nature of Economies.*

The enhanced recognition of natural systems and great natural features is integral to a renewed understanding of the urban setting. While this renewal is still in its inception, it is already producing forms of development which are inherently more environmentally friendly. It is also producing a cultural predisposition to a new form of co-existence, the intertwining of city and nature and an altered sense of place. As Betsy Barlow Rogers, the former Executive Director of the Central Park Conservancy, states: "As the city becomes more park-like, the park becomes more city-like." An interesting contrast is Frederick Law Olmstead describing his own work in 1870: "We want a ground to which people may go easily after their day's work is done ... where they may stroll for an hour, seeing, hearing, and feeling nothing of the bustle and jar of the streets, where they shall find the greatest possible contrast with the restraining and confining conditions of the town, those conditions which compel us to walk circumspectly, watchfully, jealously, which compel us to look upon others without sympathy."

The environmental theme has developed a broad popular appeal, establishing new common ground which often cuts across class, cultural and political lines. This appeal is often out ahead of political perceptions and existing policies. It also encourages interesting new ethical questions, challenges and opportunities, such as the emergence of "Green Principles" and evaluation systems such as the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rating system developed by the American Institute of Architects which deals with impacts on ground, water, air, use of energy, materials, and the treatment of waste (U.S. GREEN BUILDING COUNCIL). There are also efforts underway to create a similar kind of rating system for landscape architecture.

How is the practice of urban design, architecture and landscape architecture on re-cycled urban lands affected in a world where this new perception of nature is emerging? Several examples illustrate the current state of the art, including many of the urban places where significant remediation and renewal efforts are currently underway. These cities and their unique relationship to their settings offer a source of great promise and potential. To quote Jane Jacobs (2001), "Cities are the 'crucible' where solutions are found to problems that are otherwise quite intractable."

Five projects illustrating different aspects of the potential for re-use

• Saint Paul on the Mississippi – Development Framework

Beginning in the 19th century, the City of St. Paul exploited the advantages of the Mississippi River (fig. 1) while securing and developing its urban area by displacing the natural landscape.

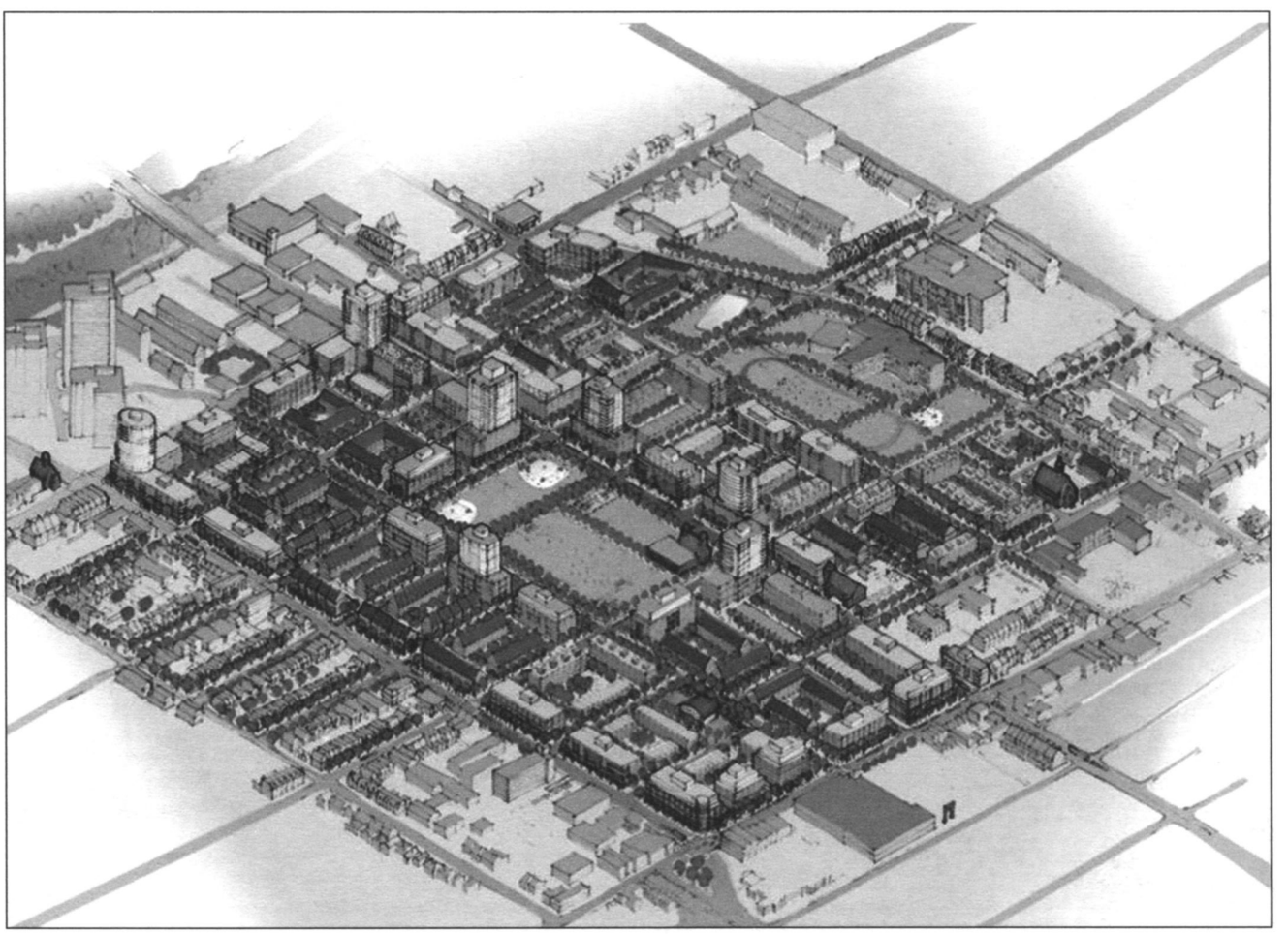

Fig. 1: St. Paul on the Mississippi. (*Source:* Cover of the "Development Framework" report).

However, in the early 1990s, a new appreciation of the river emerged, based on "Great River Park" and ecosystem concepts designed to re-establish the relationship of the river and the city. This led to a development framework in 1994-95 to incorporate a new vision of the community through urban design elements and, most importantly, the reconnection of the city with the river by restoring the historic landscape and creating, ultimately, an urban forest within the city (fig. 1).

• Brooklyn Bridge Park Master Plan

Initiated by the Brooklyn Park Local Development Corporation, this project demonstrates the opportunity created by revival of an historic waterfront. It is one element of restoration within a larger pattern of parks, green spaces and redevelopment of New York Harbor, which includes the creation of selected areas of natural shoreline and new green edges (fig. 2).

• Boston Harbor

Two new private developments, Fan Pier, Boston and Kendall Square, Cambridge illustrate the commercial opportunities for green development, especially in collaboration with a public realm plan based on small scale green spaces within the urban area. The series of new public places: Courthouse Park, Tidal Park, Fishing Pier, the Cove, the Public Green and the Institute for Contemporary Art provided a larger context involving six new city blocks and two new squares. One project, the Behnisch and Behnisch building, received a platinum rating under LEED certification, one of the highest achieved in the U.S. (fig. 3).

• Regent Park, Toronto

The Toronto Community Housing Corporation has prepared a comprehensive redevelopment plan and recommendations for the public/private renewal of Regent Park, one of Canada's oldest and largest public housing projects in downtown Toronto (fig. 4). The plan shows that it is possible to re-integrate this neighborhood with the rest of the City by introducing streets, creating generous new park spaces, aligning buildings along the streets and providing opportunities for employment, education, culture, and community facilities. It proposes that a mixed income, mixed use neighborhood with a diversity of built form and activities replace the current Regent Park. The plan is based on a pattern of urban blocks framing a major new central park and greenways, linking a series of smaller neighborhood squares and parks and schools.

• Glen Cove, Long Island

This 50-acre, Superfund site along the Glen Cove Creek, connected to the historic downtown, will be redeveloped as a new waterfront neighborhood incorporating a mix of new uses

Fig. 2: The Brooklyn Bridge and port lands.

Fig. 3: Boston Harbor during a sailing display.

Fig. 4: Artist's aerial concept of Regent Park, Toronto.

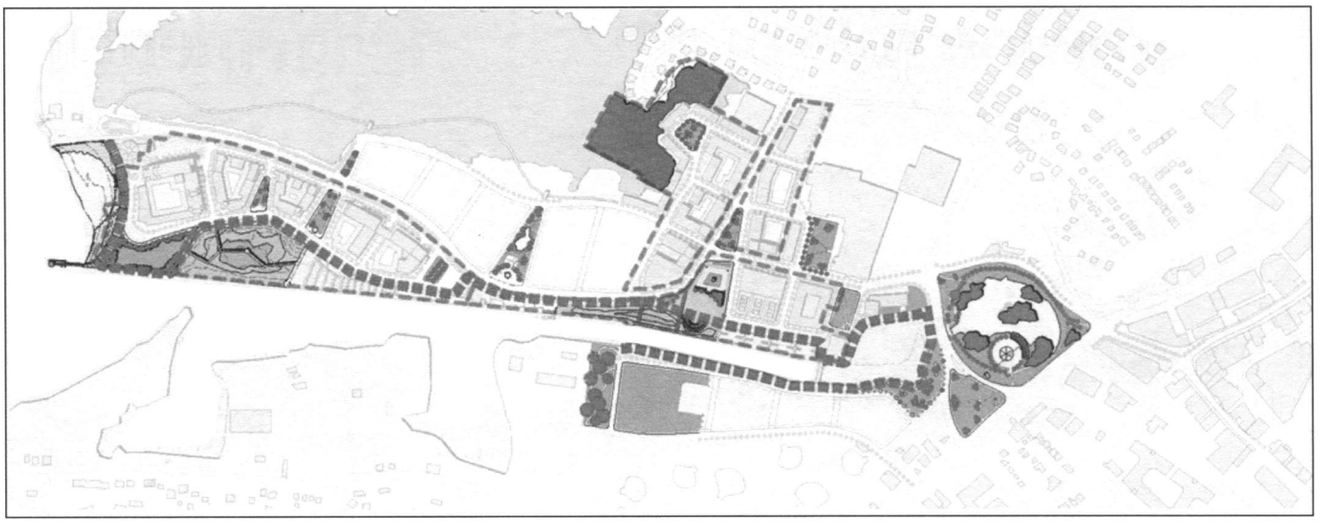

Fig. 5: Developers' proposal for Glen Cove.

including hotel, marina, conference center and a variety of commercial, retail, residential, cultural and entertainment facilities. The plan envisages a series of neighborhood clusters stretching along the Creek from Pratt Park and the existing downtown area to the open water of the Sound. The whole grouping is linked by a continuous water's edge promenade and a trail system tied to an existing County preserve which offers a variety of experiences, from a restored tidal wetland to active boating and recreation, a ferry connection to Manhattan and a beachfront (fig. 5).

Conclusion

Without exaggerating the importance of these examples, they give rise to some cautious optimism. They reflect a new shared vision which suggests a profoundly different sense of opportunity as well as aesthetic appreciation. On the basis of this new vision, one can look forward to a change in the image and use of urban places, a greater integration with natural settings and in built environments where a greater mix and complexity of uses contributes to an improved urban lifestyle and culture. As this new urban growth and succession occurs, there is also evolving a more mature aesthetic sense that appreciates that development, as in nature, is a messy process which is perpetually unfinished.

The perception of new "green" characteristics is also leading to changes in design approaches at the level of city plans and of individual buildings and landscapes. New places reflecting these approaches will become more rooted and specific, with the underlying layers of the natural setting revealed and better understood. To work in this way, clearly new kinds of professional alliances will be needed including Urban Designers, Planners, Architects, Landscape Architects, Engineers and Environmentalists.

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