Title
Solutions in Search of a Problem   [The International City Design Competition]

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Santiago Abasolo, Simon Atkinson, Wayne Attoe, Robert Mugerauer (Gold Medalist).

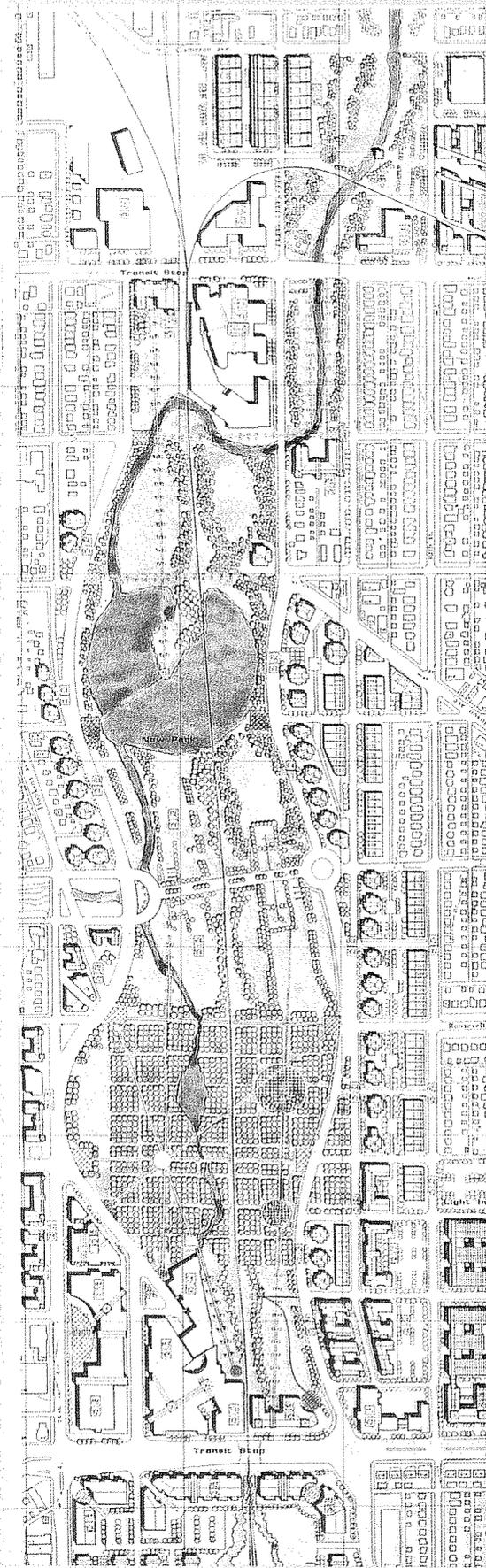# Solutions in Search of a Problem

Amos Rapoport

Two things influence the comments that follow. First, I was a member of the committee that developed the program as well as a member of the jury. Second, on both I represented a different view of design, predicated on research-based knowledge derived from environment-behavior studies (EBS) and a variety of related disciplines. These comments, therefore, address some general and very important issues that I raised during the program committee meetings but could not address during the jury process. In fact, they are based on notes I made while on the jury knowing that I would not be able to use them there and then.

The program asked competitors to select a future involving assumptions about a variety of economic, occupational, educational, demographic and similar variables. Proposals were to be derived from these assumptions. To me that meant an acknowledgement that design, particularly of cities, cannot be arbitrary and subjective, but is a serious problem-solving activity. I therefore, expected an explicit chain of reasoning and inferences leading from the setting of explicit objectives based on the assumptions, and the use of research-based knowledge, to proposals satisfying these objectives. After all, one can hardly judge whether a thing is done well unless one knows what it is supposed to do—and why.

From that perspective the entries were generally disappointing. Lacking were clear objectives—notions of what things should be like and why—and any link between assumptions and proposals.

Competitors checked the assumptions but seemingly ignored them, proceeding in the usual non-explicit, arbitrary way to manipulate shapes and spaces, buildings and vegetation. The few who did engage in serious analysis also ignored the assumptions and either neglected proposals or made proposals that neither derived from nor emerged from the analysis. As a result there was no clear rationale for decisions, no clear or explicit goals, nor any possibility of justification of any goals—even if one could infer them. The lack of chains of reasoning, of explicit linkages among assumptions, data, relevant research and proposals made it difficult, if not impossible, to analyze, discuss and, hence, evaluate the proposals rationally.

Even the problems were never identified—and unknown problems cannot be solved. Yet problems could be derived from the assumptions. For example, the assumptions selected by each competition team would lead to a certain distribution of population groups. These population groups could be expected to have certain lifestyles leading to the need for cer-

An integral component of planning for the Older Neighborhood District is re-evaluating the street system:
• The existing street grid would be extended to the edge of the new park.
• New residential blocks would be half the size of existing blocks to allow better public access to the park from the residential areas.
• Two curvilinear streets would mark the edge of the park.
• An existing street would be continued through the park and under the railroad.
• A network of pedestrian paths would be provided in order to link the lake area with places for sports activities, small squares at the end of streets and the proposed transit station.
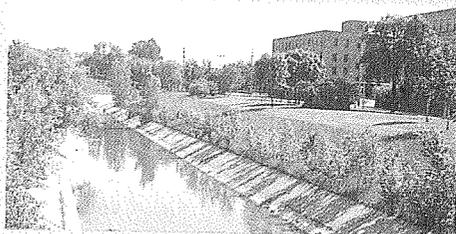
Lincoln Creek passing through the Older Neighborhood District competition site.

tain facilities for instrumental supportiveness and certain meanings, imagery, etc., for supportiveness of latent functions. The degree of variability of environments follows from the projected diversity of such groups, their sub-cultures and resulting lifestyles. From this, desirable environmental quality profiles can be inferred with certain attributes expressible through a set of facilities, forms, shapes, spaces, colors, vegetation, linkages and so on.

One way in which this can be done is through scenarios. These enable thinking in scenes and hence settings which can be illustrated in three dimensions. This was why the program asked for such illustrations. Scenarios enable social, demographic and cultural assumptions to be related to proposals, avoiding the problem of "planners' people."[1] Not doing so leads to abstract and vacuous proposals because competitors do not consider the likely inhabitants, visitors and users of settings. It follows, as is so often the case, that such illustrations were used mainly as decoration or window-dressing—like the assumptions made.

As I have long argued, competitors seemed to launch immediately into manipulating shapes and spaces, buildings and vegetation; they seemed to be concerned with how to do things, neglecting the far more important questions: what are the problems and hence what should be done and why? Although the program tried very hard to make them address these questions it did not succeed.

It was also clear from the program, as it should be generally, that adequate design, especially of cities, cannot be done by designers alone, even those with some knowledge of EBS. Hence, entrants were encouraged to form interdisciplinary teams involving planners, social scientists and EBS specialists as well as designers. While I still have no data, I doubt that such teams were in fact formed. If they were, the approaches and knowledge of other disciplines did not visibly (and certainly not explicitly) influence the proposals. That seems to support my position that mainstream designers are unwilling and probably unable to use knowledge and others' expertise. In fact, it has been shown that even when research is done by designers themselves it is not used in design.[2]

All these shortcomings not only weakened the proposals for Milwaukee but made transferability much less likely—or even impossible. I doubt that it was even considered. Certain local, specific and idiosyncratic features dominated (while others, such as climate, were generally ignored) but no apparent consideration was given to Milwaukee as an exemplar of a class of declining, nineteenth-century industrial cities—as had been intended. Needed were generic approaches (and even proposals) modified by local specifics. To give just one example, the emphasis on the lake front and the river should have

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Along the central riverfront, the intersection of Wells Street, 2nd Street and Plankinton Avenue (where they form "Plankinton Square," the pedestrian precinct) demonstrate how the automobile can be integrated into the urban landscape without destroying the quality of outdoor spaces for the pedestrian.
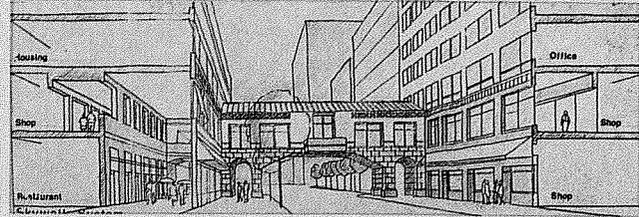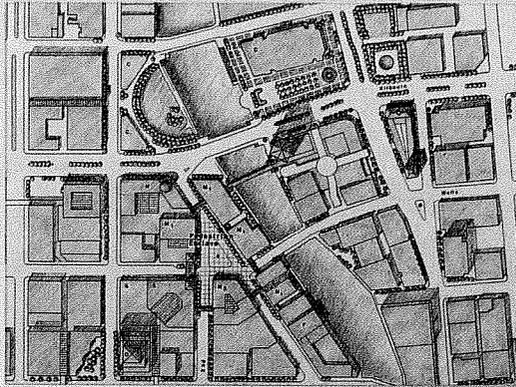
Skywalk systems can be used to help define outdoor spaces...

...rather than destroy urban space and pattern.
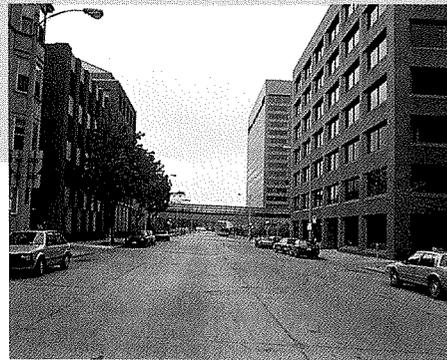
been generalized to water edges; their treatment and linkages derived from assumptions and related to the lifestyles of the likely users in the downtown, older neighborhood and growing edge contexts. Only in that way could proposals influence policy relevant to this particular class of cities.

Finally, in these very brief comments, I find it significant that there was general agreement that the proposals for the growing edge were the weakest; in my view these were followed by the older neighborhood with the downtown proposals being the strongest. I think this is because the latter is most constrained by local and specific conditions, whereas the first is the least constrained and hence the most generic. Yet constraints are essential—the essence of design is a *choice among alternatives* using research-based criteria gradually to reduce the decision-space. The results show the inadequacy of arbitrary, subjective, idiosyncratic criteria mainstream designers typically used to make decisions. It also bears on the unwillingness (or possibly the inability) of designers to derive constraints from the program, from the research literature and from the knowledge of other disciplines.

I thus conclude where I began. The competition revealed the typical and traditional weaknesses and problems of designers and the design professions. It confirmed my position that fundamental changes are essential; the state of the art in city design (as of design in general) is pretty woeful.

Notes

1. E. W. Wood, Jr., S. N. Brower and M. W. Latimer, "Planners' People," *AIP Journal*, 32:4 (228-234) (Chicago: American Planning Association, 1966).

2. S. M. Low, *Professional Culture: The Boundary between Theory and Practice in Design* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, NIE, Education Resource Information Center, No. ED 2129290, 1982).