

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Tomilea Allison, Bloomington, IN; Gary McCaleb, Abilene, TX; William A. Johnson, Jr., Rochester, NY; Kay Granger, Fort Worth, TX [The Mayor's Institute on City Design]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8s47g6cj>

### Journal

Places, 10(2)

### ISSN

0731-0455

### Author

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### Publication Date

1996-01-15

Peer reviewed

# Mayors



Tomilea Allison.  
Courtesy David Snodgrass.

**Tomilea Allison, Bloomington, Ind.**

*Mayor Tomilea Allison asked the Mayors' Institute for advice on restoring a historic structure, known as the Showers Building, in a decaying light industrial neighborhood near downtown. The city wanted to reuse the building as a new city hall and hoped that the project would serve as a catalyst for further renewal. Allison spoke about early resistance to the project, how it was overcome and the impact the project has had on the surrounding area.*

**CS:** What did people in the community think about restoring the Showers Building?

**TA:** There was strong opposition. The building itself has always been one that everybody loved, partly for its architecture — the saw-toothed roof and the brick facade — and partly because it had been the home of a major local employer. But a lot of people, including certain members of the city council, considered reusing the building a folly because it is located in a valley near some railroad tracks and where some disreputable bars once were.

**CS:** How did you overcome that opposition?

**TA:** The building was finally rehabilitated through a three-way partnership between the city, Indiana University and a private developer known as CFC.

Because CFC had had previous success with rehabilitation projects, it was able to convince people that it could do a good job.

The major obstacle to the process was the university's massive bureaucracy. Although the university was supposed to lease office space in the finished building, it wasn't certain it wanted to. The entire process took six years, and we had our dedication last November.

*The city's investment in the old factory has already spurred other projects, Allison notes.*

**TA:** To the west of the Showers Building, an old creamery has been renovated into offices. Just beyond that an artist relocated an old house for offices and rehabbed a building for studios. To the east, the county agreed to buy an old manufacturing plant for conversion to offices, a project that was delayed due to environmental contamination. North of that, a local businessman has bought buildings that housed an adult bookstore and shady motel, and has rehabbed them for use as a group home for teenagers and a nicer motel. All of this started after the city began work on the Showers Building.



Left to right: Nancy Graham, West Palm Beach, Fla.; John DeStefano, Jr., New Haven, Conn.; Thomas Barnes, Gary, Ind.; Steve Hettinger, Huntsville, Ala.; Joseph P. Riley, Jr., Charleston, S.C. Courtesy Daniel S. Grogan.

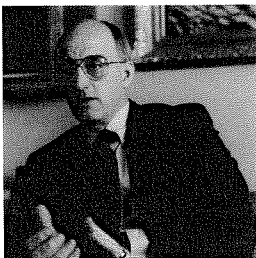
At the institute, we discussed downtown as having four nodes that should be connected with pedestrian pathways — the Showers Building, Courthouse Square, Indiana University and the convention center. Near its gate, the university is constructing a mixed-use project that will have retail on the first floor, offices on the second and apartments on the third. As part of that project, a landscape architect with the university developed a streetscape improvement plan which we asked him to extend throughout the rest of the area. The university is paying for improvements in its area, the library board has agreed to incorporate the streetscape plan into its expansion plans, and the city is paying for the remainder of the improvements, with funds raised through the Showers Building bond issue.

*Mayor Allison's experience at the Mayors' Institute helped her make the vision of a new city hall in this area acceptable, but the learning experience did not begin or end there.*

**TA:** I had an interest in design before, and I've always been a local activist. I became interested

in the physical fabric of the city after a new shopping mall began to empty out downtown. And I read a lot.

Mainly I try to get design introduced early — one of my biggest frustrations is not having money for design in the early stages to help sell a project — and to plant ideas everywhere I can.



Gary McCaleb.

**Gary McCaleb, Abilene, Tex.**

*Mayor Gary McCaleb wrote “Ten Commandments for City Design” while attending the Mayors’ Institute. They included “Thou shalt never give away a public street, and “Thou shalt (almost) never build a building higher than five or six stories.” Since then, he has remained one of the institute’s strongest supporters.*

**CS:** You’ve talked about the importance of “design thinking” in revitalizing cities. What do you mean by “design thinking?”

**GM:** Some people think in visual terms while others think more quantitatively. I find that people seem to fall into one of three categories. As soon as you begin to describe a design concept, some people get it immediately. Others are able to get it with more explanation, such as when you show them a picture. There are others who will never get it because design is not in their frame of reference. These people tend to think of themselves as more pragmatic, even though I believe that good design is also functional — it can enhance usefulness, acceptance and appeal, all of which a mayor should be developing with regard to the way citizens feel about their city.

**CS:** What is the mayor’s role in promoting design thinking?

**GM:** The mayor doesn’t have to assume the role of master designer. The mayor can have a lasting influence on the city by identifying good design thinkers in the community, encouraging their efforts and placing them on key committees and boards in order to permeate all decision-making areas.

I also see the mayor as an elaborator. You can’t let yourself think that if people don’t understand right away they never will. If you really have a good idea, you have to be patient and keep trying to help people understand. I keep in mind something Walt Disney said, that nobody has the right to kill a good idea before it gets a chance to live.

**CS:** How has design thinking helped Abilene?

**GM:** It’s the story of our whole downtown. In 1989, downtown was almost gone — closed buildings, boarded up windows. We had some proposals, but every time I gave a presentation people questioned whether we weren’t just pour-

ing money down a rathole. The two most important projects were the old train depot and the railroad hotel across the street. Abilene is a railroad town, and trains still run right through the middle of the city. That’s why, I argued, the hotel and the depot were so important.

The depot was refurbished for use as a visitors’ center and cultural affairs office; the hotel was transformed into a museum. These projects were done with a combination of funds raised by private business and citizen groups, local foundation grants and city support — both financial and in-kind. Those two projects really got things going. Later, the Paramount theater was totally redone. It now shows classic movies every weekend.

Our latest initiative is to plant trees. Abilene is in flat west Texas, so in 1990 I challenged people to plant 10,000 trees every year for ten years. That’s about one tree for every person in Abilene, and so far they’ve been doing it. It has really changed the way people feel about the community. It is not very encouraging to drive through a downtown that’s boarded up and covered with graffiti. Now we have new restaurants and stores, and businesses who had moved out of downtown have moved back in. We’ve even planted trees along the right-of-way in order to transform the railroad into a long, green park. There’s no question that our people feel better about their city.



William A. Johnson, Jr.

**William A. Johnson, Jr., Rochester, N.Y.**

*Mayor William Johnson, Jr., was elected on a platform that emphasized a commitment to city investment in struggling neighborhoods. His first project was to attempt to create a new pedestrian-oriented shopping area that would spur local commercial development.*

**WJ:** My first impulse was to use a vacant grocery store site as an anchor for a development of small shops, modeled after a successful project I had seen in Cleveland. I've had an incredibly difficult time, though, in finding a tenant for the grocery store. In Rochester, there is a single chain that dominates the local market, and that chain keeps closing stores in the city so that everyone will have to shop at the superstores they have built right outside the city limits.

So I found a model in Richmond, Va., where a small grocery store operator, with the help of a number of investors, took over five inner-city stores from another operator who no longer wanted to operate them. They call it Community Pride Grocers. I found a wholesale distributor to agree to form a partnership with a small-scale local grocer operator — to provide technical support and competitive pricing — and told them the city would help them compete with the larger chain. We had a public meeting to try to convince people in the neighborhood that they should support this store when it opens, and we have grassroots support, but the developer is still nervous.

The store has become a symbol. If we can make it work here, in one of the worst neighbor-



hoods in the city, we can do it all across town. Nobody wants to drive through a neighborhood where the shops are all boarded up. We have to return life to this city.

**CS:** What is the biggest frustration you face, as mayor, in trying to improve the quality of the design of your city's public places?

A significant frustration is the common perception that good design that reflects the special character of the community is a frill or a luxury. This is a particular problem when working with chain or franchise operators who use a cookie cutter approach to development. A resource base of how standard designs have been adapted to fit local character without prohibitive costs would be a great help.

**CS:** Why should mayors be concerned about the design of their city?

How a community looks to its residents and businesses, both current and future, plays a major role in how citizens, taxpayers and voters feel about their community. It also sends an image, positive or negative, to those investors who will influence the future economic health of the community and its residents.



Kay Granger.  
Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

**Kay Granger, Fort Worth, Tex.**

*Mayor Kay Granger created an uproar when she told her city manager that proposals for an addition to the local library were so bad they ought to start over again.*

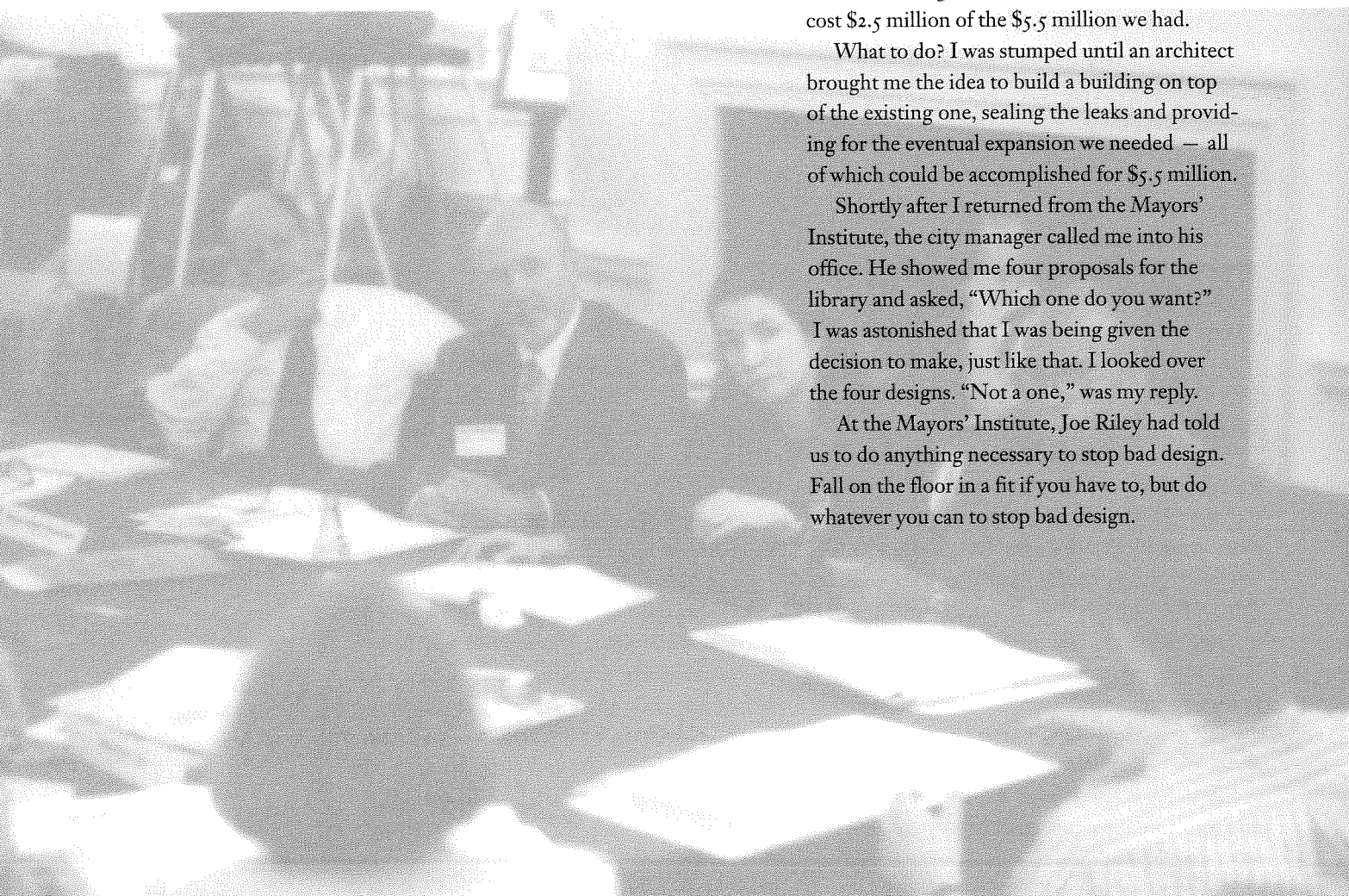
**KG:** When I became mayor, I inherited plans for a new central library that we could not afford. Our existing library was partially underground, and it leaked like a sieve. The plan for the badly-needed new facility called for \$20 million. We had \$5.5 million. “Okay,” I said. “We can’t afford to build this right now, but we can at least fix the leaks.” Then I got the bill for the leaks: it would cost \$2.5 million of the \$5.5 million we had.

What to do? I was stumped until an architect brought me the idea to build a building on top of the existing one, sealing the leaks and providing for the eventual expansion we needed — all of which could be accomplished for \$5.5 million.

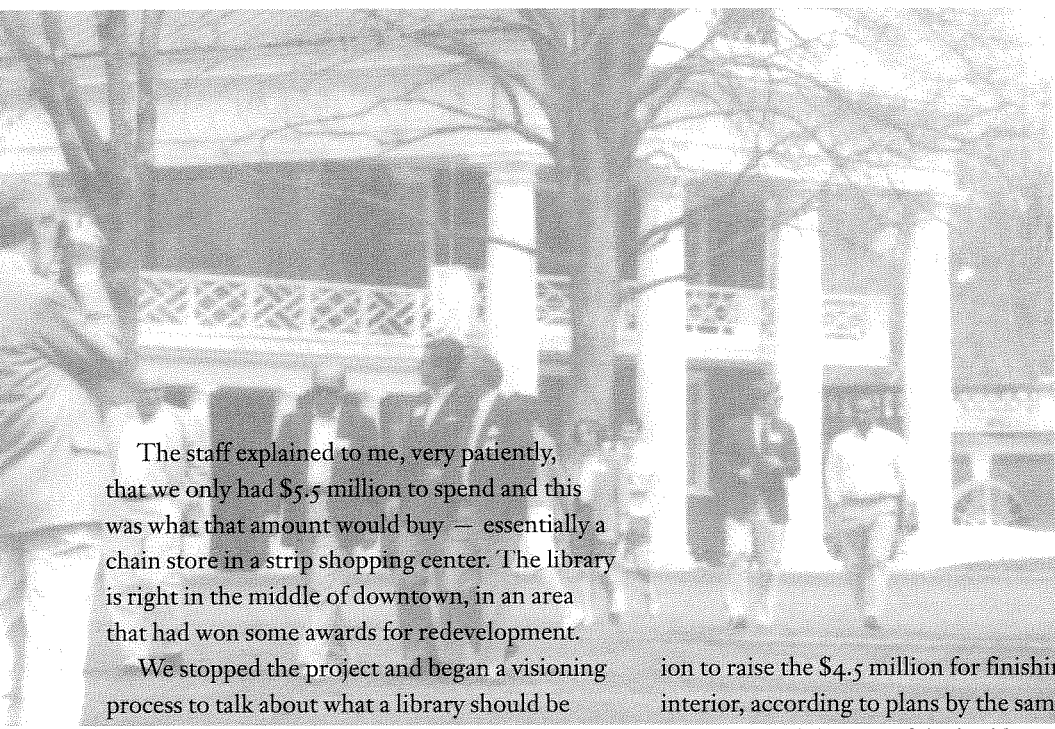
Shortly after I returned from the Mayors’ Institute, the city manager called me into his office. He showed me four proposals for the library and asked, “Which one do you want?”

I was astonished that I was being given the decision to make, just like that. I looked over the four designs. “Not a one,” was my reply.

At the Mayors’ Institute, Joe Riley had told us to do anything necessary to stop bad design. Fall on the floor in a fit if you have to, but do whatever you can to stop bad design.







The staff explained to me, very patiently, that we only had \$5.5 million to spend and this was what that amount would buy — essentially a chain store in a strip shopping center. The library is right in the middle of downtown, in an area that had won some awards for redevelopment.

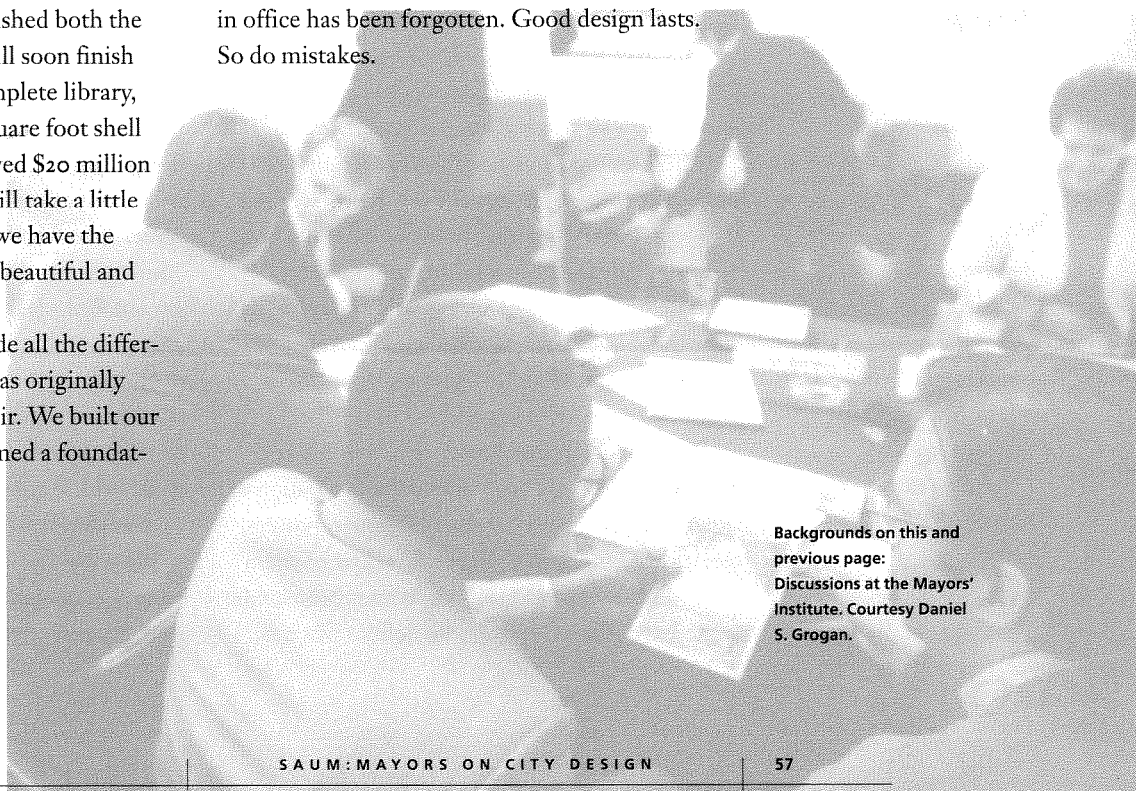
We stopped the project and began a visioning process to talk about what a library should be and how it should function. Time and time again, I was told by staff that we couldn't do what we were doing. "You don't have enough money," they'd say. "You don't have enough time. Just get on with it. Choose one." We persevered. We brought others in. In our minds we collectively began to build a public building of distinction, structure and style.

Another architect joined the team, working with us to bring in a design that fit out downtown, fit our vision and accomplished both the expansion and the repairs. We will soon finish our library building — not a complete library, but a two-block-long, 50,000 square foot shell (the size of the originally conceived \$20 million facility). The interior buildout will take a little longer and will be completed as we have the funds, but this public building is beautiful and the people are proud of it.

The change in design has made all the difference in the world. The project was originally envisioned as an emergency repair. We built our building, fixed our leaks and formed a foundat-

ion to raise the \$4.5 million for finishing the interior, according to plans by the same architect who designed the rest of the building. People are so pleased with what we are doing that private donations are right on schedule.

The biggest frustration for me is that the people most responsible (in my case, city staff) are so often willing to put up with bad design or no design. It's frustrating that one should have to throw a fit to avoid bad design. But my involvement has made a great deal of difference in a project that will last for years after my time in office has been forgotten. Good design lasts. So do mistakes.



Backgrounds on this and previous page: Discussions at the Mayors' Institute. Courtesy Daniel S. Grogan.