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### Title:

Development Plan and AWI Vision for the Southwest Waterfront [EDRA / Places Awards, 2003 -- Planning]

### Journal Issue:

[Places, 16\(1\)](#)

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### Publication Date:

2004

### Publication Info:

Places

### Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8sh9216x>

### Acknowledgements:

This article was originally produced in Places Journal. To subscribe, visit [www.places-journal.org](http://www.places-journal.org). For reprint information, contact [places@berkeley.edu](mailto:places@berkeley.edu).

### Keywords:

places, placemaking, architecture, environment, landscape, urban design, public realm, planning, design, EDRA, awards, planning, development, AWI, vision, southwest, waterfront, David Mouffat

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# Development Plan and AWI Vision for the Southwest Waterfront

SL This is an important site in a very poor neighborhood that has had a lot of problems. It's an incredible resource, this waterfront. And the neighborhood wants it developed.

But nobody's been able to succeed on this site ever before. They did it here by being more comprehensive, I would argue, and getting more committed. JC This is a serious,

significant, fully comprehensive body of work. It's not being diagrammatic or schematic. SL It's part of a huge process that starts at a very large scale and works down. At each scale, not



Good revitalization plans often succeed by making the complex seem simple. In established urban settings, one reason may be that only the clearest visions can lure entrenched stakeholders to put aside their fears of change and pull together for a common future.

The difficult legwork behind such visions, however, often belies their veneer of inevitability. Much hard-headed investigation must normally take place behind the scenes to sort through the complexities of local real estate economics, regulatory structures, and patterns of ownership and to realistically account for such physical problems as infrastructure upgrading and environmental mitigation. And then there is the political process. Success here often hinges on effective outreach, identifying objections and accommodating concerns before they can create difficulties during later phases of the approvals process.

Jurors in 2003 identified the Development Plan and AWI Vision for the Southwest Waterfront of Washington, D.C., as just such a comprehensive, professional product. In a nutshell, it envisions transforming the lands adjacent to the Washington Ship Channel into “a world-class waterfront district” for the nation’s capital.

In addition to praising the plan—by a primary consultant team of Hamilton Rabinovitz & Alschuler, Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners, and Greenberg Consultants—for its thoroughness and clarity, the jury also cited its potential to bring real change to an area long bypassed by such placemaking efforts.

## A Troubled History

The condition of lands along the Washington Ship Channel has been an embarrassment to officials in the nation’s capital for years. The channel, itself, was created at the end of the nineteenth century to provide port facilities and reduce the severity of seasonal flooding. During the early twentieth century it served this purpose well, while adjacent neighborhoods accommodated port-related businesses and worker housing.

The current character of the waterfront area only emerged during the urban-renewal era of the 1950s and 60s. This was when large swathes of southwest Washington were declared “blighted,” and redeveloped with new mid- and low-rise housing and commercial structures. About the same time, the area was also cut off from the nearby Capitol Mall by construction of Interstate 395.

In many ways, southwest Washington provides a textbook example of the ills of such heavy-handed government intervention, says Neil Kittredge, Southwest Waterfront project manager for Beyer Blinder Belle. Across the country, many poor urban communities were similarly devastated during this period. But after fifty years, it should be possible to take a new look at the real quality of places like southwest Washington today, he says, and build on what is there.

In positive terms, Kittredge points out, Washington’s southwest now accommodates a viable neighborhood of mixed income and ethnicity. Architecturally, the area also provides an almost pure example of modernist space, consisting of rental and co-op housing superblocks with green, airy interiors. On the other hand, the near complete destruction of the southwest’s historic fabric created featureless intervening spaces that are almost completely dominated by vehicles. And this is nowhere more apparent than along the waterfront, where urban renewal met the channel in a series of access roads and parking lots that came to serve little more than private marinas, tour-boat operators, and isolated, pavilion-style restaurants.

The Southwest Waterfront Plan envisions a two-stage approach to the transformation of this area. First, a “Development Plan” addresses things that can happen

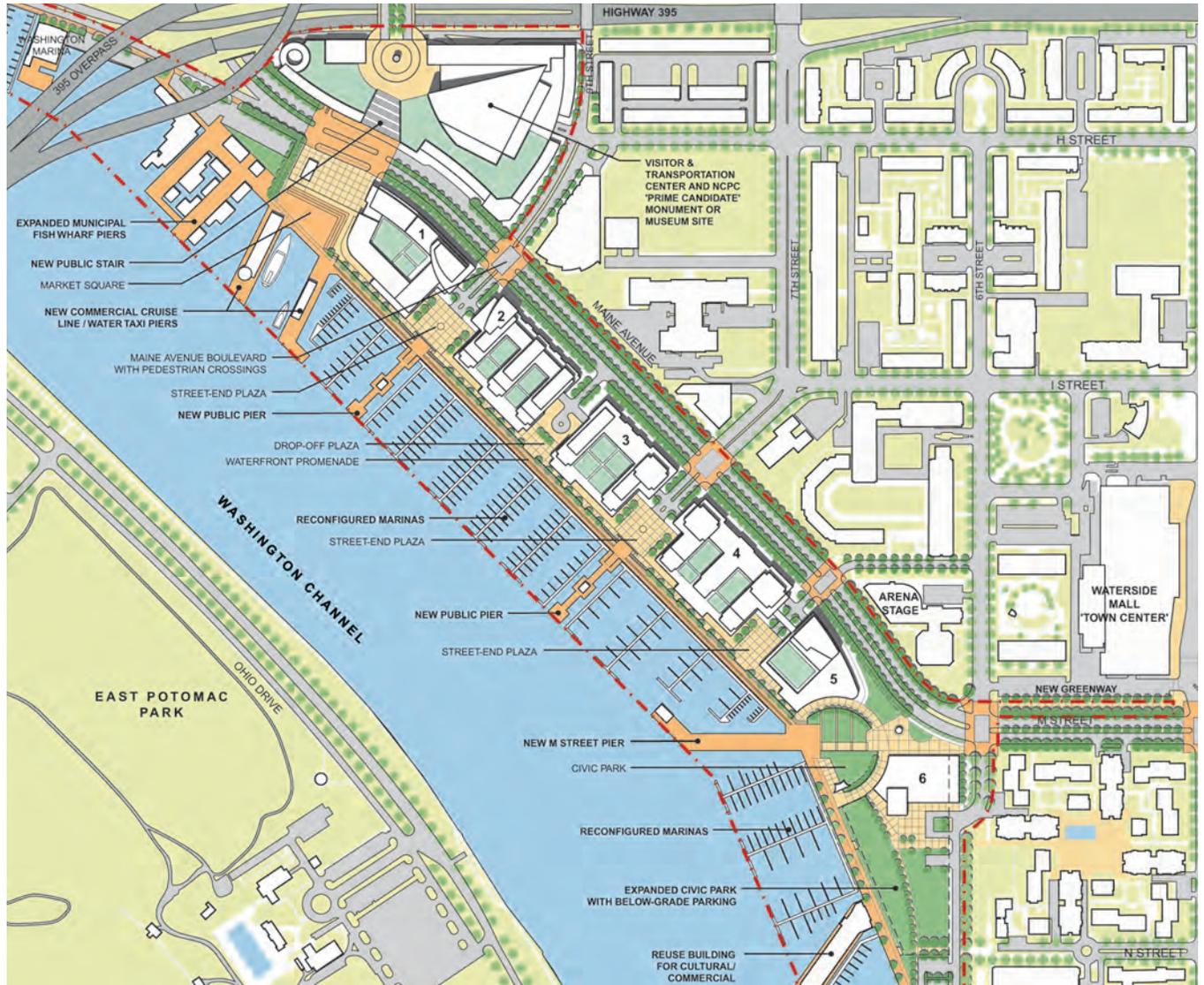
**Above:** Outreach to neighbors played a significant role in establishing the form of new mixed-use buildings along the Ship Channel. Computer collage courtesy of Beyer Blinder Belle.

**Opposite:** The larger opportunities for the area are contained in the “AWI Vision” portion of the plan. Numbered buildings would be developed during the earlier “Development Plan” phase.

only did they have public hearings, but they went back to the community. It's an incredible piece of work. You can see the depth of the study. You can see the broad range of the overview. And it's politically endorsed, so I guess it's really going to happen. JC But they didn't leave

it at that point. They get absorbed in envisioning what this place could be. It's not just analysis. SL And it's beautifully presented and it's clear and understandable, which I think for this kind of document is important. I think that's one thing we haven't said today. I know readability has made a

difference. I think that how you present your material, it's not just the quality of the graphics but the order and the logic of it. There needs to be a kind of internal logic. The graphics need to be clear. The vision needs to be out front. The details need to follow the design. Those are small



right away to establish the basis for a new waterfront neighborhood. A second “Vision” section then proposes longer-term actions to consolidate its character and establish better connections to the city around it.

### A Larger Vision

Over the years, a number of studies have addressed the potential for redeveloping lands along the Ship Channel, says Uwe Brandes of the District of Columbia Office of Planning (DCOP). But none have come to fruition, in part because of the great difficulty overcoming the legacy of urban renewal. A perennial lack of communication between federal and District agencies has also stalled redevelopment efforts in general in the nation's capital.

What finally appears to have broken the logjam is the Anacostia Waterfront Initiative, a comprehensive effort to use redevelopment of lands bordering the District's “forgotten” second river to revitalize its entire southern half. AWI was inaugurated toward the end of the Clinton Administration through a memorandum of understanding between the District and some twenty federal agencies with jurisdiction over land bordering the Anacostia River.

District of Columbia Mayor Anthony Williams has been a major force behind AWI. Since his election, Williams has sought to bring a new focus on economic revitalization to local politics. Indeed, one of his stated goals has been to attract 100,000 new residents to the District.

In terms of the southwest waterfront, Brandes also

things, but yet they're important professionally. And this is an incredibly professional job. ALS It certainly has an eye toward implementation. There's market analysis, some preliminary cost estimates. It really goes as close as possible to actually finding the money and doing the project. I was

impressed by the comprehensiveness of this project. WM I would agree. It's an exhaustive research. It is so well done it has the power of getting built. The goal of all these things is to get something done. SL The biggest problem would be the threat of gentrification, if and when it does happen.

That's not really necessarily talked about here. If this were to happen, would the residents still be able to live on this waterfront? Or does it really ultimately mean relocating them?

points to the significance of a new partnership between his agency (DCOP) and the National Capital Revitalization Corporation. A public economic-development corporation which began operation in January 2001, NCRC controls much of the property along the Ship Channel through a subsidiary which succeeded the District's old Redevelopment Agency. Today, while DCOP has been managing the larger AWI effort, NCRC has been driving its southwest waterfront element.

The reason why NCRC has a special interest in the area is obvious. Other parts of AWI focus on rebuilding public housing, developing new sites for offices and government buildings, and restoring parks and the natural quality of the river itself. But because of their largely undeveloped character, the lands along the Ship Channel have long been seen as the ideal location for an entirely new mixed-use community.

Altogether, the plan estimates such a development would result in \$9 million in annual tax revenue for the District, 1,500 permanent jobs, 800 new housing units, sites for several new cultural buildings, and improved public access to the water.

### **A New Waterfront Community**

The core of the initial Development Plan for this area is the consolidation of six new mixed-use development parcels facing onto the Ship Channel. These, in turn, are to be set in an entirely new armature of public space. To the north (adjacent to the city's existing Fish Market) it envisions a new market square; to the south would be a more naturally landscaped park; and the waterfront would then be tied together by a widened promenade.

The key to creating this new spatial hierarchy is the replacement of redundant parking lots and vehicle circulation with a single, well-designed boulevard along Maine Avenue. "Without changing the road patterns you cannot create land areas that are big enough to do much development," Kittredge says. Once the parcels have been assembled, the plan calls for them to be developed privately. Each would include retail and office uses oriented to the new public spaces, apartments on the upper floors, and parking in their interiors to make up for the lost surface lots.

Among other things, the plan specifically argues against the establishment of a themed retail setting similar to New York's South Street Seaport. A critical mass of new residents is extremely important in this regard. Only full-time residents can create the constituency for "a real urban place," Kittredge says. To show the viability of such mixed-use buildings, the plan includes extensive economic analysis by Hamilton, Rabinovitz and Alschuler.

Another key proposal involves strict design guidelines

to ensure a "high-quality modern architecture." If there is one area of Washington where traditional styles are inappropriate, it is here, Kittredge says. Innovative modern design could be very important in terms of complementing the better qualities of the older urban-renewal areas.

### **Further Connections**

Once the impact of the new mixed-use buildings and waterfront public areas has been established, the plan imagines that aspects of its longer-term, "Vision," section would come into play. Of particular importance here is the rebuilding of a hill south of I-395. The hill was originally formed out of material excavated during freeway construction, and today it is occupied by an oval waterfront overlook that serves as little more than an architectural conceit at the end of L'Enfant Way.

According to Kittredge, this overlook was once intended to connect to the waterfront, but it never did because of grade difficulties. As a result, anyone wanting to walk from the Capitol Mall to the Fish Market today must bypass the homeless people camped at the oval, then clamber down a thirty-foot hill, and dash across a high-speed multilane roadway.

In its Monuments and Memorials Plan, the National Capital Planning Commission has already identified the oval as the site for a major new federal structure. But the Vision section goes further by pointing out some of the important urban design goals such a monument of memorial might fulfill. Most importantly, if it were to incorporate a grand public staircase, it might create a rewarding pedestrian connection between the waterfront, the Metro station in the nearby L'Enfant Plaza office complex, and the Capitol Mall beyond. Equally significant would be the establishment of a parking and multimodal transportation hub on the podium floors of the new building. Such a facility would have immediate access to I-395, and could provide space for idle tour buses that now clutter the waterfront. Such a transportation facility might also be tied to important "waterside" changes. One might be expansion of the city's historic Fish Market to include restaurants and other commercial uses.

More difficult, but equally significant, would be a swap of location between current private marina berths and a new cruise-ship pier, Kittredge says. The transportation facility would be key to such a reorganization because it would allow parking for cruise and party-boat operators to be removed from the southern end of the waterfront. This, in turn, would allow a more appropriate gradient of uses to be established, from the bustle and energy of the northern end, to a quieter, more residential character in the south.

Finally, the Vision section proposes a number of public



improvements that might be paid for with tax-increment financing. These include public piers, a pedestrian bridge to East Potomac Park, and the expansion and redesign of the currently dismal walkway beneath I-395 and Rte. 1 that connects the southwest waterfront to well-used parklands around the Tidal Basin.

The Vision section even mentions the possibility of cutting a ship canal across East Potomac Park. Not only would this allow boats more direct access to the Potomac, but it might re-establish the cleansing flow of water through the Ship Channel that was lost when the gates at the head of the channel were permanently closed to protect the scenic qualities of the Tidal Basin.

### A Complete Product

Jurors not only complimented the plan for its ideas, but for its consistent layout, clear writing, and helpful graphics. In later sections, its individual recommendations are accompanied by images of successful urban design interventions elsewhere. This gallery of success stories provides a spur to the imagination, and ranges from housing prototypes in Vancouver; to the detailing of the water edge at New York's Battery Park City; to the construction of light rail transit in Portland, Oregon, and a pedestrian bridge in Bilbao, Spain.

Jurors also noted that the basis for many of the proposed changes is amply documented in appendices to the plan. These fill nearly half its length with analyses of market,

transportation, infrastructure and environmental issues.

Finally, they noted that the planning effort also made a serious attempt to include the views of nearby residents and waterfront stakeholders. "The plan will absolutely have an impact on people who own or rent there," Kittredge notes.

Among other things, the size of the proposed new buildings were subject to careful scrutiny at community meetings, where massing simulations were analyzed from a variety of viewpoints. The plan was also subject to periodic review by a working group combining major stakeholders and representatives of federal and local agencies.

Ultimately, the plan "is as much a reflection of the community's views as it is of ours," Kittredge believes. Some residents will lose unobstructed views of the water, but on balance it will add tremendous value to a neighborhood currently dominated by speeding traffic and parking lots.

— *David Moffat*

**Upper left:** The Ship Channel during its heyday in the early twentieth century. Photo courtesy of Martin Luther King Library, Washington, D.C.

**Upper right:** view of southwest waterfront today showing Fish Market in foreground and 10th Street overlook. Photo courtesy of DCOP.

**Lower left:** Map of Washington, D.C., showing location of Anacostia River and the southwest waterfront plan area.

**Lower right:** The open spaces and modern design of existing apartment complexes in southwest Washington. Photo courtesy of Beyer Blinder Belle.