Stream of consciousness

Photo: Peter Papademetriou

Paseo del Rio by night.

The river has given this Texas city not only a point of orientation but a new psychological lease on urban life that can operate on several basic levels.

Somewhere, as you walk along the length of the riverside on the Paseo del Rio in San Antonio, the thought inevitably sinks in: it's all real. Relationships between this stream and the urban fabric above and around it finally come into focus: the river exists, is used, and those uses are real. The Paseo del Rio, a 2½-mile-long stretch of esplanades, shops, cafes, or just plain parks along the San Antonio River is unique to the U.S. Like the Parisian quais, it is located down a level from the city's street grid. But the Paseo offers even more cafes and activities than its Parisian counterpart: It seems even more European. Naturally, this lower level ambience contrasts remarkably with the busy, often dusty, streets of San Antonio above. Perhaps the disparity between the two levels of urban experience makes the Paseo even more special, more unforgettable.

The river's psychological hold on San Antonians as an embodiment of the city itself is proof that such a sensibility can be created. The Paseo also provides a constant frame of reference to which a diverse range of social groups, public agencies, private developers, etc. respond. This "urban psyche" results from a complex history involving the standard tale of how the river was ignored in the past. Its problems were compounded by continual devastating floods, but the river was recognized by active groups as being potentially unique. For over five decades, the trend has been reversed, leading to the creation of the Paseo del Rio, one of the great urban settings in the United States. And now efforts are being undertaken to examine the entire fabric of San Antonio as an integral part of the river corridor. The River Corridor Study (P/A Design Awards issue, Jan. 1974 p. 76), was possible only after 50 years of changing, but always concerted, effort to bring the river's existence into the lives of an entire urban population.

Roots on the river

The river is basic to San Antonio's existence. A plateau formation gathers headwaters from the river into a series of springs, allowing easy use for irrigation and cultivation.

Intrigued by the abundance of water and the possibilities

for irrigation, Friar Antonio de San Buenaventura Olivares built Mission San Antonio de Valero in 1718. Mission San José followed two years later. Within a decade, three more missions had moved from East Texas. This particular heritage excels in architectural quality; 225 years later, the future of these missions is being defined by a plan evolved from, and related to, the River Corridor Study.

By the post-Civil War period, San Antonio was a developing city of regional significance: the river supplied both power and a resource to new industries. The prevailing attitude during the Anglo period was one of exploitation of the river on one hand and neglect of its amenity potential on the other. By the turn of the century there were only occasional exceptions such as the King William Street houses (p. 64 right top) where large, landscaped lawns rolled down to the river. The general pattern of San Antonio's higher density development turned its back on it. Where earlier Hispanic residents had a sympathetic regard for the river, the Anglos ignored it.

This disagreeable relationship was furthered by extensive and repeated flooding of the central business district: The river's small cross-section in the city and the absence of a natural buffer above help aggravate the effects of heavy rains without proper technological devices.

A 100-year flood that hit San Antonio in 1920 raised the level of the river about 35 ft above normal. Belatedly, the city adopted a report, calling for flood control measures. One feature of the report recommended filling in the Horseshoe Bend in the heart of the city to straighten the channel. Talk also began to circulate about covering the river, making it a sewer, and converting the space to a north-south thoroughfare. A controversy ensued, and the San Antonio Conservation Society was formed in 1924 to save the Bend. Ideas were proposed to develop the river into a landscaped inner-city parkway. Elimination of the Bend was prevented, and the Depression killed the parkway plan.

In the mid-1930s, a hotel manager instigated the formation of the San Antonio River Improvement District after the city had earlier refused to match funds collected by property owners. On their own, this group voted to impose a district tax and then applied for a WPA grant; through this effort, the initial concept of the River Walk was fleshed out by 1941. Two restaurants opened: the first Casa Rio, in 1946, nearly washed away in the flood of the same year.

And its fruition

In the next few pages the fruits of these early efforts become clear. The development of the Paseo del Rio, and later the River Corridor Study, represent a growing consciousness of the amenities and potentials riverfront planning should have. Because of the unique river setting (now social as well as environmental), the lessons to be learned from San Antonio are difficult to extract. The city's small size probably helped generate the community response to the river, and pressures for development on it are fairly low-key, ensuring its maintenance, survival, and growth. The resultant community consciousness has been built upon this image. The town can now look to the future when multivalent decisions achieve a dimension for the area as permanent, but changing, as immediate, but flowing, as varied as the river which is San Antonio.

[Peter C. Papademetriou]

San Antonio at street level. Photo: John Dixon

Photo: Peter Papademetriou

San Antonio's river walk below street level (above and below).

Photo: Peter Papademetriou

San Antonio

Planning for the Paseo

In 1961 the Marco Engineering Company of California proposed a year-round fiesta attraction; access to the river would possibly involve admission charges. Clearly, there had to be a middle ground. In 1962, the City Council passed on ordinance establishing a River Walk Commission, with the San Antonio Chapter of the AIA preparing a master plan for development. At last, the potential to extend the urban fabric down to the riverside for at least a part of the Horseshoe Bend was to be recognized. The firm of Callins & Wagner produced a land use plan, a recommendation for planning districts, a capital improvement plan for both private and public sector investment, as well as back-up research, documentation, and a model.

This Paseo del Rio (River Walk) master plan determined the zoning occupancy according to noise or activity levels. A progression of activities keyed to the existing development of walks, structures, and landscaping was established, linking relating similar activities but allowing for a change of pace along the walk. Adaptive and sympathetic treatment was to be given to existing structures, all of which had been inventoried. In 1964 San Antonians approved a $300,000 bond to make further municipal improvement along the Paseo. Hemisfair '68 provided further incentive for improvements and a $2 million River Extension Project was undertaken by the Urban Renewal Agency. The net result since the study of 1962 has been some $20 million invested in river walk property and business development, with some 30 businesses actually on the river itself.

The river walk extends beyond the limits of the commercial area of the Bend; as a city park it is patrolled and well-lighted. Relatively limited in real size, the developed area nonetheless has established a new credibility for the river in overall terms. A by-pass channel and control gates at both ends allow intensive development there without danger of flooding.

A recent user survey conducted by Texas A&M University (April 1973 *Landscape Architecture Quarterly*) indicates the development is extremely successful with its users. Such a response was consistent over a wide range of ages, incomes, and occupations. Even the controlling agencies, who are not bound officially, revealed a unanimity of policy and believed the present arrangement, dependent on a high degree of collaboration and cooperation, was working well. The Paseo del Rio and its extensions now have high identity. The variety of links and connections to the street system above—through buildings, at street bridges, down spiral stairs—must partly account for the Paseo's excessive use. It is perceived as safe, easy to find, unique, urbane, restful, and affording possibilities for solitude or excitement and gregariousness.

Photo: John Dixon

The architectural character of the historic buildings next to the river or in the nearby King William section below reinforces its European aspect.

Photo: John Dixon

Photo: Peter Papademetriou

A noncommercial parklike setting along the Paseo (above) supplements the more urban activity oriented section (below).

Photo: Peter Papademetriou

Planning for growth

It was the recognition of the river's potential as a catalyst for community support, and a continuing need both for comprehensive flood control and revitalization of San Antonio's traditional center, that brought circumstances together to create the River Corridor Study.

As conceived, the study was a combination of federal funding to undertake planning and flood control, available from HUD through the creation of a joint River Corridor Committee representing 5 separate government entities. Primary consultants chosen by the committee were Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and planners Marshall Kaplan, Gans & Kahn, both of San Francisco.

The River Corridor Study is essentially based on the consciousness of the river as a psychological point of orientation and connection to the physical world. It begins with an in-depth proposal for water management, to bring about both comprehensive water quality and safety in flood control, and to undertake community-wide revitalization as a result. This aspect proposes that recreational and visual amenities be planned and funded beyond basic Corps of Engineers standards since "the benefits measured in terms of the enhancement of the environment and development potential of the Corridor more than offset these costs."

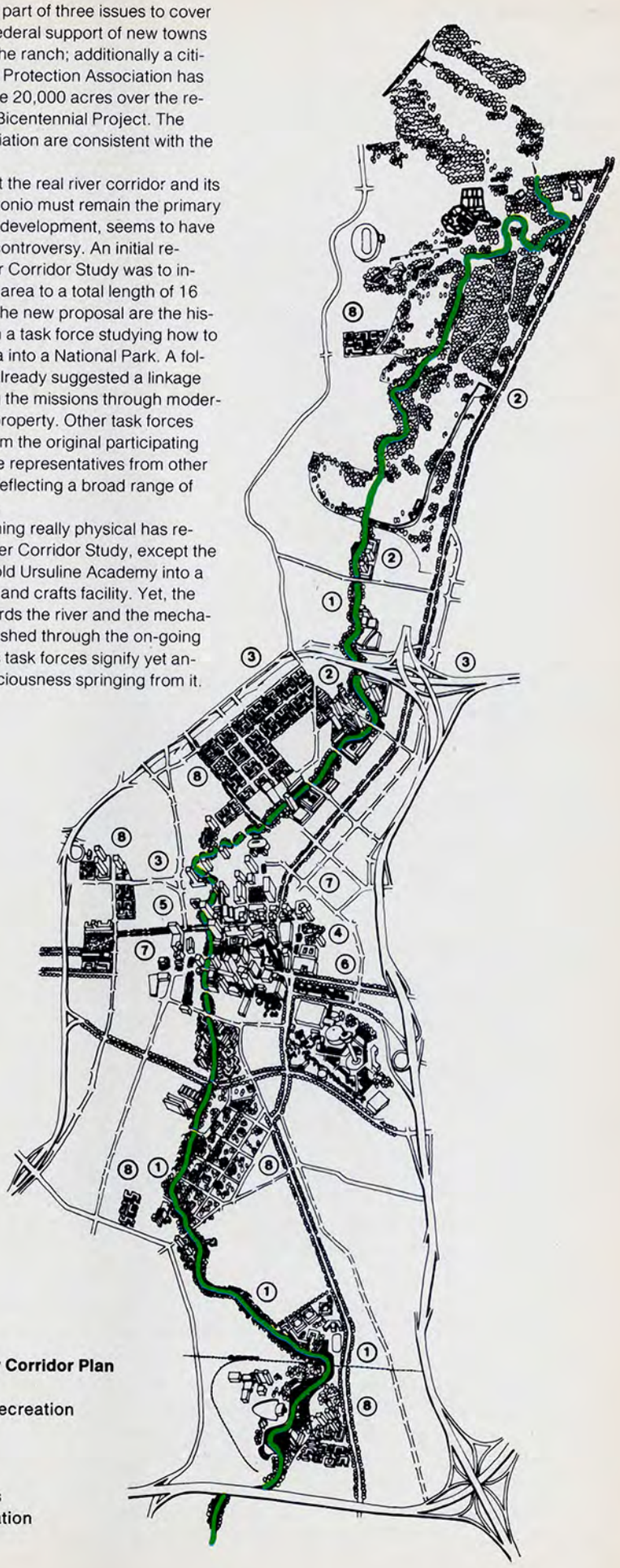
In a concern for CBD revitalization, the study identified traffic access and congestion as being prime problems for the spotty decline of the downtime core. Rerouting of through traffic, and an intercept parking with miscellaneous access improvements, are proposed to encourage reuse of the center city. Having achieved this, a viable pedestrian network could be established, linking five functional "districts" already existing, but whose identity would be sharpened.

Center city represents one aspect of the study. Given equal emphasis is a strategy for generating a string of viable, mixed neighborhoods along the 7½-mile corridor. Central to this strategy is housing, most of which is in questionable condition. Proposals create a mix of densities and dwelling types, along with necessary health and social services, education and public safety measures. The study concludes not with a plan but with a *management* strategy—coordination of existing agencies to maintain credibility in the community.

While the study was in progress, a turmoil of sorts was brewing, since plans had been announced for the "Ranch Town New Town" to be located 25 miles from central San Antonio, ultimately housing 85,000 people. This development would clearly sap energies from a limited urban population base, and also potentially would endanger the city's water supply by being situated directly over the Edwards Aquifer. A cry from various environmentalists and agencies got enmeshed in politics "wired all the way to the White House," according to the *Texas Observer*. Another "new town in town," also announced by the promoters of Ranch Town, was expected to appease San Antonio planners. Yet the second proposal north of the core was bound to jeopardize the Corridor Study's intentions. Further, planners preferred to direct new growth and change to the south end of San Antonio. Fortunately, in the end the measure was defeated in a scenario so complex the *Observer* devoted the better part of three issues to cover it. The demise of federal support of new towns has also stopped the ranch; additionally a citizen-based Aquifer Protection Association has formed to purchase 20,000 acres over the recharge zone as a Bicentennial Project. The goals of the Association are consistent with the Corridor Study.

A realization that the real river corridor and its role within San Antonio must remain the primary concern for viable development, seems to have resulted from the controversy. An initial response to the River Corridor Study was to increase the project area to a total length of 16 miles. Included in the new proposal are the historic missions, with a task force studying how to implement the area into a National Park. A follow-up study has already suggested a linkage system connecting the missions through moderate acquisition of property. Other task forces have expanded from the original participating agencies to include representatives from other advocacy groups reflecting a broad range of community issues.

At this point nothing really physical has resulted from the River Corridor Study, except the conversion of the old Ursuline Academy into a neighborhood arts and crafts facility. Yet, the new attitudes towards the river and the mechanisms being established through the on-going activities of various task forces signify yet another level of consciousness springing from it.



Proposed River Corridor Plan

1 Flood Control
2 Open Space/Recreation
3 Access
4 CBD Retail
5 CBD Office
6 Visitor Services
7 Internal Circulation
8 Housing