
PREFACE

A New Vision for Urban Riverfronts

Cities are rediscovering their rivers. For at least the past 30 years, cities and towns have been turning back to their rivers, transforming industrial and derelict land into new parks, residences, and commercial space. The trend appears to be continuing and perhaps even accelerating, with major planning and construction efforts underway in cities around the country. After abusing urban rivers through years of hard use and neglect, we have come to realize they are valuable economic and community assets.

While this renaissance movement has been overwhelmingly positive, the prevailing view of the urban riverfront is of a blank canvas for “aesthetic enhancements” and economic development initiatives. Too often, the river itself is not considered, an oversight that ignores the possibilities for enhancing the ecological value of the river. Ultimately, these missed possibilities are detrimental to the city and the public, not just the environment. As cities reclaim their rivers, a rare opportunity is offered to repair past damage, to prevent new injury, and to create more sustainable communities. In virtually every case, these cities have a tremendous opportunity to direct riverfront revitalization efforts that will help to bring rivers and the communities that depend on them back to health.

To take advantage of this opportunity, we need to effectively integrate ecological considerations with economic and social goals along the nation’s urban rivers. This Planning Advisory Service Report promotes the view that we can achieve much greater environmental as well as social and economic success if urban riverfronts are designed with ecological principles in mind. While we have some mechanisms for protecting our environment, such as water-quality regulations, environmental considerations are often an afterthought in urban riverfront planning. Yet the manner in which these riverfronts are developed can have a tremendous impact on water quality and other environmental concerns.

This Planning Advisory Service Report promotes the view that we can achieve much greater environmental as well as social and economic success if urban riverfronts are designed with ecological principles in mind.

We firmly believe that communities will find better, more appealing, and more sustainable solutions by integrating ecological considerations upfront in riverfront redevelopment efforts. Indeed, the experience of many communities suggests that treating the river as an equal partner improves environmental quality and quality of life—both of which have significant economic impacts for cities.

This PAS Report aims to put forth a new vision for the nation’s urban riverfronts. It provides a set of planning and design principles that can be employed to ensure that, as we reclaim our urban river edges, we do so in the most ecologically sound and economically viable manner possible. The material in this report is intended to help planners, mayors, public works and environmental officials, river advocates, and the general public in their research about effective, ecological riverfront design. The report is structured to provide general information on a number of key topics related to ecological health and human interaction with rivers. It is not intended as a comprehensive list of all issues of concern on riverfronts, but rather as a set of essential ideas that can help communities to achieve more with their riverfront revitalization efforts.

This PAS Report does not address in detail the economic development issues that must also be considered for community riverfronts to be vital and successful. Cities that may want to use the principles described here are likely to be heavily engaged already in economic development activities. Nor does this report address the classic aspects of planning, architectural, and landscape design requirements for successful public spaces (e.g., how to improve the image of a derelict or abandoned urban riverfront area, or how to organize pedestrian pathways to build a sense of liveliness and interest in a place).

The reality in many cities is that significant riverfront development has already happened, and that redevelopment of some kind is now planned or underway. Our report begins from this premise. Further, we assume bringing people to the river often involves providing facilities and services that require buildings and other structures.

This PAS Report, therefore, does not call for removing all buildings or preventing any new structures, but it does espouse a strong view that minimizing impacts and keeping urban riverfronts as natural as possible (i.e.,

not overburdened with buildings, roads, and other concrete infrastructure) should be a goal for all cities. Indeed, in many instances, it makes better sense, economically and ecologically, to remove old structures and keep new development out of the floodplain and away from sensitive river areas.

In most instances, the ideas and ecological principles put forth in this report can, and should, be applied to river edges being considered for new development. Having said that, we strongly encourage communities to resist extensive new development in the floodplain and along the urban riverfront. Communities should instead seek to maintain a more natural, undeveloped river edge. It is still possible, and often just as desirable, to place housing, commercial space, restaurants, shops, and other amenities near, but not on, the urban riverfront.

Chapter 1 gives some very general background on and history of urban riverfront redevelopment efforts and briefly addresses the benefits of more fully integrating ecological considerations into urban riverfront projects.

Chapter 2 provides background on urban river health, including a basic primer on the key components of river ecosystems that communities should consider as they plan and design riverfront developments. Discussion of any of these components could easily fill a book and is given only a brief overview in this report.

Chapter 3 is the heart of the report. It offers guiding principles for ecologically sound urban riverfront development, including some general perspectives, a set of planning principles, and a set of related, more detailed, design principles.

Chapter 4 gives an overview of the economic benefits of including strong river protection and restoration elements in community riverfront projects.

Finally, Chapters 5 and 6 present two in-depth case studies for the Chicago River and the Willamette River in Portland, Oregon. Both cities have attempted to infuse their urban riverfront revitalization efforts with a stronger ecological focus, and the stories of what they are trying to accomplish and how they are doing it are valuable and vivid reading.

*Rebecca R. Wodder
President
American Rivers*