Let Milwaukee Be Milwaukee

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The competition recognized that there are definite character-
istics uniting certain urban areas. The exploration in this case
was of the problems and possibilities inherent in late nine-
teenth-century, mid-sized industrial cities such as Milwaukee,
Cleveland, Rochester, St. Louis and Minneapolis.

These cities do not have the lively urban qualities of New
York, Chicago, or San Francisco, nor are they as amorphous
and spread out as southern and western metropolitan areas;
they have a certain rather pleasant density, particularly in their
older residential areas. They exist because of a natural feature,
generally water, which made their industrial growth possible,
and a human-made feature, railroads, which carried their
products to markets. The strong work ethic of the immigrant
populations still exists and is celebrated. In the past 30 years
the industrial base has diminished and in some cases has been
replaced with a service and information economy.

The most creative thoughts came in proposals for the older
residential area, a district where the single family house on the
50-foot lot prevails and there are few apartment buildings or
town houses. The competitors looked at the problems with
fresh eyes, possibly because the elements of the existing neigh-
borhood—housing, commercial, industrial and a park with a
stream—were an interesting and unusual mix, and possibly
because these issues have seldom been worked with on an
area-wide basis.

The solutions were successful in two ways. First, competi-
tors understood and respected the scale of the neighborhood.
They added shopping areas and cultural centers that had an
appropriate scale and texture. Second, they worked with the
existing natural features—the park and the stream—to make
them integral to their solutions. Sometimes the park became
larger, sometimes smaller, but the successful schemes always
used it positively.

Solutions put forth for the downtown area, while strong in
many cases, were less fresh than those in the older residential
area. The existing visual tension between older low buildings
lining the street and the new high-rise structures standing
apart is difficult to deal with, and relatively few solutions
addressed it.

Some of the downtown solutions were simply too grand.
They provided public spaces far beyond what is realistic for a
city of this density. There was an underlying assumption in
many solutions that all downtown areas must thrive with life as
New York or Paris—virtually impossible here since no one
lives downtown and very few people live within walking dis-
tance. Perhaps more importantly, few people want to live

P L A C E S 8:3
downtown. In cities like Milwaukee, those people who “pioneer” move to the older residential areas, which have great character and are very pleasant. Somehow we must recognize the fact that these downtown areas are quiet after 5 p.m. and that this is not necessarily a problem. For urban dwellers, quiet has become synonymous with danger; this is not always the case.

An opportunity overlooked in many downtown schemes was the city’s most dominant physical feature—Lake Michigan. One of the urban strengths of Milwaukee’s neighbor, Chicago, is that the lake front has a strong public presence. It is unbuilt on for most of the city’s 65 miles of shore line and is entirely in the public domain. This is not the case in Milwaukee. The enormous potential of the lake was recognized and celebrated in the best schemes, but it was ignored in many others.

Jurors generally agreed that the area with which entrants dealt least successfully (many abominably) was the outlying suburban/farm section. Schemes varied tremendously—from no-growth proposals (perhaps to the jury’s eyes the best) to wildly futuristic chaos. A medieval village caught our eye almost in relief. It occurs to me that the addition to the teams of a visionary landscape architect would have been a tremendous help here. The existing, gently rolling farmland with woods, an existing road grid, and some random develop-

ment—these could have been best joined with new development within a strong conceptual landscape framework.

One of the goals of the competition was to encourage realistic urban planning that could be implemented. With the exception of some of the suburban schemes, most of the competitions worked toward that end. The winning schemes intrigued the jury for many reasons—one being their in-depth, micro-analysis of urban situations. These analyses dealt realistically and contextually with Milwaukee, and they provided solutions that could be adopted easily by planners.

This is the first in a series of competitions, each with a different city “type” as its focus. It is important that these competitions continue.