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Replacing a Shopping Center with an Ecological Neighborhood

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Restoring wetland ecosystems in neighborhoods where they have been engineered into pipes and filled in for development has become a familiar goal within ecological design. However, it may also be a successful economic redevelopment strategy for urban neighborhoods. The right design for a wetland park can provide the necessary public amenity to

Top: The original plan for Phalen Wetland Park in 1995 envisioned how the restored natural area would serve as a neighborhood amenity, wildlife habitat, and means of cleaning stormwater runoff.

Opposite: Current proposals fragment and privatize what was originally intended to serve as a public open space corridor, and introduce suburban street and housing development patterns.

attract new higher-density, mixed-use development. In response to the work presented in the last issue of *Places* on “Retrofitting Suburbia” (Vol. 17, No. 2), the case of the Phalen Village Small Area Plan in St. Paul, Minnesota, offers many important lessons.

Restoring Nature

The idea of replacing one of St. Paul’s oldest shopping centers with a wetland park was first proposed by landscape architect Joan Nassauer, architect Harrison Fraker, and students at the University of Minnesota. Our task, ultimately funded as part of a Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources design research project, had been to assist the City of

St. Paul and Phalen residents explore a range of design alternatives for a deteriorating and financially bankrupt strip shopping center.

After we first proposed the wetland park, Phalen residents embraced the idea. Some of the oldest could still remember childhood fishing excursions to a small lake that had existed there before the site had been filled in. Eventually, the park became the centerpiece of a vision adopted as part of the City-funded Phalen Village Small Area Plan—a transportation-oriented mixed-use development, including a significant amount of affordable housing.

Initially, all went well for this ground-breaking “retrofit.” Shortly



after the plan was approved in 1994, the City began negotiations to purchase the shopping-center site, and by 1998 demolition had begun to create the new Phalen Wetland Park. In addition to creating a signature public amenity, the plan envisioned the park linking to a new wildlife habitat "spine" and helping filter and retain local stormwater. The first phase of the park, on land owned by the City, was constructed in 1997; the second phase was begun in 1998. Development of new businesses, institutions and housing according to the Small Area Plan began in 1998.

Today important changes in the original landscape plan for the wetland park have emerged—partly

in response to the great success of the park as a focal amenity for development. The restored wetlands have indeed become an effective part of the area's stormwater retention system. However, habitat connections among wetlands in the area have been restricted by new residential development that has begun to encroach on the park itself.

In particular, rather than maintaining crisp boundaries between the park and adjacent commercial and residential areas, much of the new residential development has been arrayed around the wetland on small cul-de-sacs. This has brought a miniature version of a familiar suburban scene—wetlands in the backyards of new single-family

homes—into the heart of one of the oldest, most urban neighborhoods of St. Paul.

A Retrofit Success

The good news from the point of view of retrofits is that the demolition of the shopping center and the construction there of a new urban ecosystem that mimics the original natural system is an idea that definitely worked. Studies have documented how the wetlands constructed during Phase One, on land owned by the City, dramatically increased local biodiversity.¹ In addition, the Phase One park site has already been recognized as hallowed ground in the cultural life of the city. It was even recently named the Vento

Memorial Grove, after the early death of the beloved environmental champion and U.S. Congressman Bruce Vento.

Meanwhile, the larger part of the wetland park, which occupies the former shopping center site, has become the focal point of a fast-developing part of East St. Paul. This area also lies within the larger Phalen Corridor Initiative, the aim of which is to revitalize and connect the larger neighborhood to downtown St. Paul by extending Phalen Boulevard. Indeed, when the redevelopment of the Phalen Village area is complete in the next five years, it will mark something of a culmination of this long-term project.

There is no doubt the wetland park has contributed to the present success of the Phalen Corridor Initiative. St. Paul Planner Curt Milburn today says the wetland has become “the jewel of the corridor.” Investment in its immediate area has also reached \$200 million, which is almost half what has been invested in the entire corridor. Among other things, since the late 1990s the neighborhood around the park has seen the addition of a \$4 million Wells Fargo Branch Bank, a Walgreen’s drug store, and the Phalen Village Clinic. Milburn also points out that construction of the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension has also brought “the CSI of Minnesota” to Phalen Village.

Housing, of course, has been the densest addition to the area. Much of it is in the form of the affordable units, as envisioned in the plan. So far, built projects include affordable senior housing facilities such as the Native American Elders Lodge and the Realife Cooperative Senior Housing. The complete renovation and rehabilitation of low-income housing in the Roosevelt Homes neighborhood, as well as the Ames Lake and Rose

Hill public housing complexes just east of the wetland, has also begun, and is slated for completion in 2006. Near that site, the construction of new Habitat for Humanity housing was also approved in 2004.

However, the newest housing development is within the planned boundaries of the wetland park itself. Called Phalen Crossing, it was begun in the summer of 2004 by River Run Properties, and its construction is expected to last four years. This complex involves at least five major sites, surrounding the wetland with a mixture of townhouses, condos, and single-family houses.

As Sheri Pemberton-Hoiby of the City of St. Paul explains, “the housing that is currently being developed is mostly market rate.” Distinct in style and options, it is equivalent to the current median-priced home in the region, averaging \$207,000.

From Public to Private Amenity

While all this housing is surely a welcome addition to the neighborhood, there is no doubt its location has severely compromised the original purpose of the wetland park as a public amenity that embodied urban ecological function. In the original plan, the wetland park’s boundary was sharply defined by public streets, making it both visible and accessible as the centerpiece of development. Now, with the intrusion of housing into it, the park is no longer experienced as “open” and available to the public. It is now defined by private property.

If there is a lesson to be learned from Phalen it is that urban ecological restoration can succeed as a retrofit strategy, but its public boundaries and access must be carefully defined, and “ownership” by adjacent residential and commercial uses must be established from the outset, so that the park has

empowered beneficiaries and defenders.

As Milburn explains, the local problem was that commercial activity was relocated from the old shopping center to arterial streets and not to the streets beside the park, where it could have activated its boundaries. Creating “a natural amenity with the only active spaces being a farmers’ market and an amphitheater,” left the open space too vulnerable to residential development pressures, particularly as the park was recognized as a desirable amenity.

This story thus involves a good news/bad news scenario with important lessons for other towns. As the community saw the opportunities being created by the design of the site, interest burgeoned among commercial entities, neighborhood groups, the federal government, and the City of St. Paul to go even further than previously imagined in reinvigorating the community. With so much pressure on building, the underlying value of the public ecological vision was subordinated to other values.

But there is another deeper story here. Why this happened? Why couldn’t the entirety of the public wetland park be embraced as part of a successful redevelopment effort?

Here one sees the power of private suburban development models overwhelming the identity and definition of public space. One can also see the opportunism of developers who recognized the amenity value of the public wetland park and incorporated it to increase the value of their own private projects.

Note

1. J.I. Nassauer, “Monitoring the Success of Metropolitan Wetland Restorations: Cultural Sustainability and Ecological Function,” *Wetlands*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2004), pp. 756-65.

Drawings courtesy of Joan Nassauer.