

H3 and FLOW

PHOTOS BY TIM EVANS

Despite several starts and stops, a **riverwalk project** is finally near its finish—bringing a new wave of economic development.

BY KELLEY HUNSMERGER



Nancy O'Keefe,
the Historic Third
Ward Association;
Mark Ernst, Engberg
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Partnership Inc.,
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Wis., USA

Not so long ago, there wasn't much to see in the Historic Third Ward District in Milwaukee, Wis., USA—mostly abandoned buildings, warehouses and parking lots.

In the last 15 years, though, art galleries, specialty shops, a theater, restaurants, condominiums and offices have sprouted up, transforming the area.

But the district remained cut off from the city's downtown, and much of the property that ran along the Milwaukee River languished.

To keep the urban renaissance going, the Historic Third Ward Business Improvement District launched a riverwalk project in 1999. The result is an award-winning walkway that weaves three-quarters-of-a-mile along the water's edge, making it easy for people to make their way from the downtown business area to the Third Ward. The design basically serves as an extension of the city's downtown riverwalk project, which had begun three years earlier.

The Third Ward project hasn't been without complications—negotiations with area property owners pushed any sense of schedule out the window. But as it nears completion, the riverwalk is already sparking economic development in the neighborhood. Along with all those new restaurants and stores, it has attracted 1,100 new units of housing and boosted property values.

"It's really an active place," says Nancy O'Keefe, executive director of the Historic Third Ward Association, the main project sponsor. "Before, it was just really 'blah.'"

These days, it's downright hip and trendy. "The Third Ward is

sort of like SoHo in New York [N.Y., USA]," says Richard Wright, project manager of the riverwalk.

In Character

From the beginning, the idea was to use the riverwalk as a way to expand the neighborhood's personality. "We didn't want just a sidewalk," Mr. Wright says.

To achieve a sophisticated look and feel, the Historic Third Ward Association partnered with the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design. They then hired landscape artist Mary Miss to consult on the design and help keep the area's character. Einar Tangen, chairman of Milwaukee's Business Improvement District No. 2, also helped coordinate the project.

Built as an independent structure, the riverwalk passes under existing street bridges and surrounds pedestrians with a view of the water on both sides. It's constructed of dense ironwood, and no stain or sealer was used so boards could naturally age to a silvery-grey color.

FORCE of NATURE

The Historic Third Ward District Riverwalk provided more than just a surface makeover. Set in a park along the walkway, the **FIELD RIVERHOUSE** is home to a model of the Milwaukee River watershed designed to teach visitors about the area's urban river ecological issues. Built on an old parking lot, the riverhouse also serves as the starting point for tours conducted by the Schlitz Audubon Society.

Low-glare lighting designed to resemble soft moonlight was chosen to highlight the reflection of the city's skyline on the water. "The lights are very romantic," Ms. O'Keefe says.

The project also included a re-greening of the river's edge using plants indigenous to Wisconsin.

Go With the Flow

Before any of the design could come to fruition, however, the project team had to secure the support of Third Ward riverwalk property owners, who would have

TEAM players



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—Mark Ernst

to give permission to use part of their water frontage. The city could wield its power of eminent domain and create a public access easement, but the team knew better relationships would be created if it dealt with the owners on a one-on-one basis. Part of the effort involved convincing owners that the public should be allowed to dock their boats along the riverwalk. "In the spirit of creating a public walkway, we really didn't want it to become a marina and have a lot of boats out there," says Mark Ernst, architect and partner at Engberg Anderson Design Partnership Inc., Milwaukee, the

project's architecture firm. Rather than building a marina, the team created locations for transient boat docking and landing along the river—a move that also encourages boats to support the waterfront businesses.

Getting everyone to sign onto the plan took some serious negotiating, though. And that wreaked havoc on the schedule. Because the team members negotiated agreements with property owners on an individual basis, they had to build the riverwalk in sections, stopping the project until the next four property owners were lined up. "It seemed like every building

changed hands during the project's life cycle," Mr. Ernst says. "A new owner came along with new set of interests and new criteria."

And that meant negotiations had to start over.

It took three years to get all of the property owners on board—stretching the schedule far beyond the original estimate. The team started constructing the walkway, thinking it would be completed "in a couple of years, but we are actually finishing up some of the last pieces of it now," Mr. Ernst says.

Because of the hold-ups, "we at some point stopped worrying about the schedule," he says. "We just had to be patient and pace ourselves and our consultants' work."

The team also had to find a contractor who could live with the schedule. "You need a flexible contractor when you do a project like this or you can get killed by them," Mr. Wright says.

Enter Beyer Construction of New Berlin, Wis., USA. "I selected someone I knew I could work with," he says. "These guys were very good about stopping and starting and waiting for things to happen."

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by the NUMBERS

cost: approximately \$11 million

size: 3/4 of a mile

start of construction: march 2001

end date: The majority of the project was completed in August 2005, but a portion that goes underneath an unfinished highway remains to be constructed.

Budget Woes

The team also faced some serious budget issues. Because much of the walkway was constructed over water and all of the materials used have to withstand the area's harsh winters, the cost per square foot was higher than most construction projects. "Our job was to not only design it, but to engage [the project team] in regards to cost along the way," Mr. Ernst says. "As the design unfolded, we did numerous cost analyses."

The design concepts also pushed up the cost, and eventually the project team decided many of Ms. Miss' original designs had to be rethought. "A lot of her ideas were pretty expensive, and we had to figure out a way to execute them while maintaining a

FINAL product



PHOTO COURTESY OF HISTORIC THIRD WARD ASSOCIATION

budget," Mr. Ernst says. Ms. Miss eventually parted ways with the project team, but he says the "resulting design was very consistent with her original design intent. Where it changed was in the details and the use of materials."

In all, the riverwalk cost approximately \$11 million. Funding for the project came from several sources, including:

- **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development:** \$1.5 million
- **Historic Third Ward:** \$688,000
- **City of Milwaukee:** Approximately \$5 million
- **Private donations:** Approximately \$312,000
- **Historic Third Ward property owners:** \$3.5 million. "Many of the owners had old dock walls that had

to be replaced, as well as new construction that they were responsible for funding," Mr. Ernst says.

The riverwalk is finally nearing completion, with only a portion underneath an unfinished highway left to construct, Mr. Ernst says.

But the project is already winning recognition. This year, it received an American Institute of Architects Honor Award for Regional & Urban Design. "This project responds to the many different conditions along the urban river's edge," the jury said. "It captures the rugged, gritty complexity of the historic buildings and the many conditions along the river and features rather than homogenizes them."

It's a river renaissance with a dose of urban reality. PM