

Looking closer : The downtown Des Moines River narratives

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

Major: Landscape Architecture

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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2004

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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GLOSSARY

autopoiesis. The process whereby an organization produces itself. Self-producing systems, where a system can be a cell, an organism and perhaps a corporation.

eidetic. Marked by or involving extraordinarily accurate and vivid recall especially of visual images.

metonymy. A figure of speech consisting of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated.

mise-en-scène. The arrangement of visual weights and movements within a given space.

moving imagery. A series of pictures projected on a screen in rapid succession with objects shown in successive positions slightly changed so as to produce the optical effect of a continuous picture in which the objects move. From a cultural perspective, the term film or video is more widely used than the more anthropomorphized ‘moving imagery’. For the remainder of this text, ‘moving imagery’ is used interchangeably with film, movies, television and video.

shot. Images that are recorded continuously from the time a camera starts to the time it stops.

poiesis. The creation, production or formation.

synecdoche. The use of a part of something to represent the whole, or of the whole to stand for a part.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the patience, guidance, inspiration, participation and support from the following individuals and organizations:

Joern Langhorst, Ashley Kyber, Debra Marquart, Julia Badenhope,
Joni Palmer, Gerry Rowland, Ralph J. Christian, Michael R. LaVelle,
Tim Courtney, Robin Paul, David B. Dahlquist, Swapnil Mandrekar,
Aaron Shaw, Forey Jacobson, Mary Kay Wilcox, Laura Popen,
Joe Kelderman, Autumn Griffith, Sandra Brasell, Kathy Townsend,
Peter Brud, Hollis Monroe, Nora Wendl, Brent Yezek, James Young,
Mimi Wagner, Lynn Paxson, David Pyles, Peter Butler, Tim Keller, Paul
Anderson, Arleen Faeth, Jodi Hilleman, Mira Engler, Richard Becherer,
Mikesch Muecke, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa Natural Heritage
and Rachel Leising.

PREFACE

Looking Closer is not a conventional study of place. It is a public survey, a site inventory and a site analysis. It is also an autobiographical journey, a visual journal, a photo essay, and a film. Above all, *Looking Closer* is a story about a place.

Incorporated in 1851, Des Moines, Iowa's genesis can be traced back to the longest waterbody in Iowa, the Des Moines River. For decades, businesses and residences grew on every major arterial east and west of the river, sustaining a thriving neighborhood at the downtown fringes. Downtown Des Moines underwent numerous facelifts during the City Beautiful movement and later through the Works Progress Administration in the name of civility and progress. Similarly, the Downtown Des Moines River was cleaned, channeled, groomed, and dammed for greater civic utilization and aesthetic appeal. The movement of large-scale commercial development westwards marked a gradual transition towards Des Moines' current state of affairs. In the process, the residential fabric of Downtown Des Moines was destroyed. Neighborhoods were carved up into apartments, transformed into businesses or demolished. Likewise the downtown river suffered disenchantment and neglect in the process.

Hitherto, the Downtown Des Moines River has become a metonymy for Des Moines' past inequities, present contradictions, and future dictums. As the city attempts to revitalize its downtown again through the Principal Riverwalk Project, this intervention will forever alter, append or even erase historical and existing landscape narratives implicit along the downtown river.

Looking Closer hypothesizes that the loss of the downtown community to perpetuate local landscape narratives precipitated the indifference towards the Downtown Des Moines River. Despite its local historical and cultural significance, the downtown river has become a transitional area where joggers would pass and drivers would cross. Contrived programmed events by the city have limited landscape experiences through personal reflection and remembrance of place. Along with pervasive homelessness along the river, physical degradation has consigned the downtown river into a landscape painting in need of new paint.

The upcoming Principal Riverwalk Project may serve to program new popular attractions by the river and reinvigorate its physical apparatuses to a great degree of reverence. Yet the idea of the landscape and the attachment to an entity of such goes beyond physicality or eventful pursuits. Allowances need to be made for a community which does not have knowledge of the river's poesis to permit reflective experiences untainted by contrived attractions. A process needs to be developed to perpetuate the river's sense of place after the attractions cease to

operate. If a neighborhood is to be returned to the Downtown Des Moines River, it needs to be empowered with the knowledge of the river's ontological relationship with the city to propagate the river's stories in perpetuity.

Looking Closer is an act of narrative propagation as a form of landscape intervention. Employing film and the cinematographic language as inventory and analysis tools, collected landscape narratives are synthesized into a landscape film to be presented to the *resident community* of Des Moines.

Landscape narratives encode histories, memories and a sense of place. These codes also give rise to new narratives through reflection and remembrance. By collecting historical and contemporary narratives through literary sources, local interviews and photography, the process of verbal and visual engagement has been initiated. Similarly, in propagating these narratives through a film, the engagement is taken to a level of recovery through memory, visual perception and sense of place.

It is hoped that these landscape narratives will stimulate Des Moines to resume a forgotten conversation with its autopoiesis, the Downtown Des Moines River. Correspondingly, future interventions in downtown Des Moines' should also proliferate these narratives for its own sustenance.

The essay incorporates literature reviews on film theory, film production processes and its implications in landscape design. Likewise, it is written in the form of a film narrative, documenting the physical and phenomenological journey in making *Looking Closer*. As a practice, film production has spatial equivalents in landscape design processes. It enhances the designer's senses in seeing, reading, listening, and responding to a landscape.

Looking Closer provides a discourse for designers who wish to engage in landscape narratives and film production as a spatial design process or as a tool to inform interventions. It is hoped that the process involved in this study would suggest further research on film and its role in landscape and community design.

INTRODUCTION - CRY ME A RIVER

To trace the history of a river or a raindrop... is also to trace the history of the soul, the history of the mind descending and arising in the body. In both, we constantly seek and stumble upon divinity, which like feeding the lake, and the spring becoming a waterfall, feeds, spills, falls, and feeds itself all over again.

Gretel Ehrlich
Islands, The Universe, Home

There is truth in nostalgic movies, whether it is rooted in history or memory. Written history or 'fact' is a filtered convention that goes hand in hand with personal or collective memory. While memory serves as a voice or testimony to a uplifting or a disruptive event to be forgotten, they are also imagined and repressed. Films in particular invokes that memory. In reviewing Pare Lorentz's film-making career, Hogan (1998) wrote, "Lorentz's work expressed a belief that in turning away from the negative aspects of the present and looking back to the more successful past, America would be able to reclaim the best aspects of that past and bring themselves out of the malaise into which they were floundering." Indeed, Lorentz did capture both the successes and failures of America's past in two critically acclaimed films released during the Depression-era.

The Plow that Broke the Plains (Lorentz 1936) and *The River* (Lorentz 1938) were driven by poetic praise and disastrous imagery of the Great Plains at the same instance. This short black and white documentary was released by the US Farm Security Administration in 1938 with great critical acclaim. Inspired by a map that hung in the office of the Secretary of Agriculture, it had a panegyric feel, like a poetic song and praise, characteristic of propaganda films during that period. America went into the Depression-era while the Dust Bowl became one of the first major ecological disasters in America.

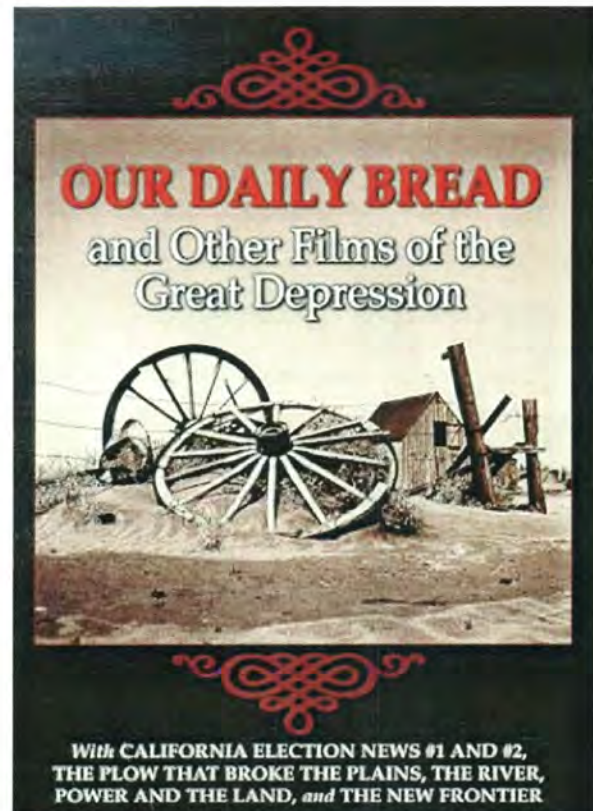


Figure 1. Propaganda films were not anomalies in dire times. They offered hope and prospect in times when all seemed lost (BoondocksNet Shops 2004).

Despite the setting in which the film revolves around, the pride of settlers and the control of a nation's great resource surges through the movie like a mighty wave with unquestionable doubt. The Mississippi River was grand in its name and volume. As we trace the path of each creek and river that drains into the mighty Mississippi, their endless names were called out with pride (Lorentz 1938):

*Down the Yellowstone, the Milk, the White and Cheyenne;
The Cannonball, the Musselshell, the James and the Sioux;
Down the Judith, the Grand, the Osage, and the Platte,
The Skunk, the Salt, the Black and Minnesota;
Down the Rock, the Illinois, and the Kankakee, The Allegheny, the
Monongahela, Kanawha, and Muskingum;
Down the Miami, the Wabash, the Licking and the Green
The Cumberland, the Kentucky, and the Tennessee;
Down the Ouachita, the Wichita, the Red, and the Yazoo...*

It was a bright summer day and a year has passed since I first watched *The River*. I found myself on the riverbank of a city not too far from where I lived. I was tracing yet another river, a river that was not honored in the film, but nonetheless, a river that did empty into the Mississippi River.

The summer sun in Iowa can get quite intense. The white clouds seemed bleached fronting a passionate blue sky. As the sun fell over the skyline, I reminded myself of where I was. I was in Des Moines, Iowa, a state capital, a metropolitan and a river town.

On a grassy hill adjacent to an extensive balustrade, I was filming the sights and sounds of a riverfront. As I panned across the sky with my camcorder, a fluttering flag caught my eye. It stood on top the local YMCA, a brick building with its back facing the downtown river. A man came out of the north entrance of the building and began walking across the bright-green grassy slope next to the building. With the exception of this man sliding across the brick façade, there was not a soul in sight.

He sauntered slowly, trying to keep an old raggedy-looking backpack from slipping off his shoulder. Unexpectedly, he turned and began walking towards me. Staring at my camcorder, he walked over undaunted. In the back of my mind, I knew he wanted to know what my presence and intentions were fiddling around in his backyard.

After figuring out his name, Bob and I had a prolonged conversation. I began with my usual inquisition of his demographic and later alluded to my project. I told him about my endeavor, to collect river narratives of the Downtown Des Moines River and consequently, compiling them into a film. He became an unwilling participant as the conversation went on.

“Do I like the river? I see the river, I enjoy looking at it, do I like it? I’m not being cute or anything but do YOU like the sky? You know ah... What’s the relevance?” His rhetorical question was thought provoking but even before I could ponder his words; he began a long diatribe.

I mean, do I like the sky, do I have to, does it change anything, is it gonna be black because I don't. The average yo-yo with more money than he's got common sense is out spending the money, yeah, I'm self-gratifying me. I don't care about the river, that's what they call aesthetics; I'll read about it, I'll watch your stuff. I don't care. That's 2003, all over the country. I don't care if you are on the Mississippi, the Des Moines River or where you're at, that's all over the country.

As the conversation went on, Bob’s tone turned from certain rejection to ambivalence towards the downtown river. Bob began describing his weekly rituals. Three times a week, he would walk across the river to benches in front of City Hall and watch the sun go down. He enjoyed the river after all.

Half an hour had passed since our conversation began. Bob had hinted his restlessness by looking at his watch. He had to resume his initial pursuit, and decidedly so, he adjourned our dialogue. Bob walked south, crossing Water Street towards the Polk County Administration Building and disappeared. I was alone again standing next to the still, lake-like river. It too reflected my solitude.

Annual art festivals and concerts soon followed throughout that summer, breaking the solitude for a brief moment. Yet each exodus after a programmed event often silences any

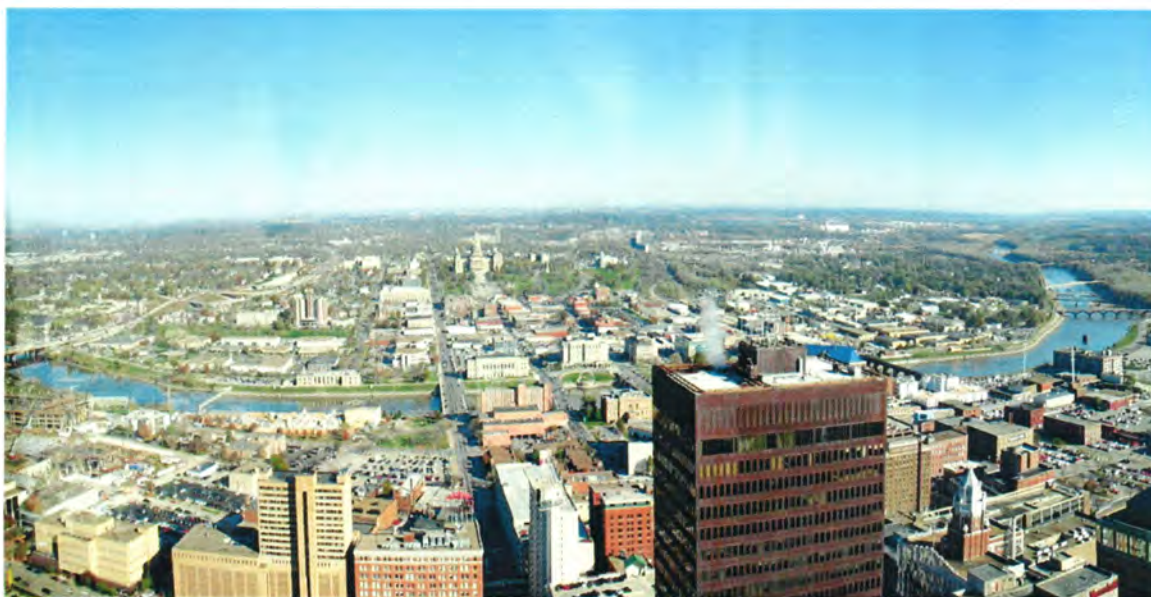


Figure 2. The Downtown Des Moines River spans north to south between University Avenue and the Scott Street Dam.

enchantment the river aspires to have. On any given day, the neatly trimmed lawns along the riverfront bear no trace of heightened affairs.

I never met YMCA Bob again in my subsequent visits to the riverfront. His insights, however, have pervaded my mind till today. How he perceived aesthetics in the landscape reflects highly on society's notion and experience of place and landscapes today.

Bob tone of voice was a 'tell'. A tell is a sign, a signifier of something that is evident but disguised as something else. Like Joe Mategna in *House of Games* (Mamet 1987), I spotted his 'tell'. Bob's 'tell' disclosed a sense of disenchantment and disempowerment. His aesthetic indifference was grounded in both societal inequalities and the disappearing landscape experience.

Bob's diatribe suggested how aesthetics in the landscape today have been relegated to the designers who construct them, the writers who describe them, the planners who program them or the artists that paint them. As designers, we have an eye for *beauty*, yet we are cursed to create *beauty*. In lieu of making place', we continue to perpetuate high art for the elite while the masses scurry to figure out what 'this new monstrosity' is. When the process in communicating and perpetuating that *beauty* to our client/public/audience terminates in design completion, the allure of the landscape/building/art we strive to create ceases to exist. Buildings become derelicts, streetscapes become voided spaces and landscapes are forgotten. The Downtown Des Moines River is such a landscape.



Figure 3. Watching the sun go down over the YMCA, a weekly ritual on the benches of City Hall.

In a way, the lack of aesthetic empowerment prevents the local community from practicing the act of seeing. In *Eidetic Operations and New Landscapes*, Corner (1999a, p. 155) felt that the landscape experience had suffered irreverence of late:

To the degree that everyday inhabitants experience landscape, they do so in a general state of distraction. Their eidetic image of places is bound into a greater phenomenal range of significance than vision or contemplative affords. By contrast, the outside—the tourist, the spectator, the state, the administrative authority, the designer and planner—views the landscape as an object, a thing to behold, and not only scenically but instrumentally and ideologically. Enterprises such as tourism, planning, and resource management predicated precisely on such a synoptic management of land.

In hindsight, Bob's dilemma was not entirely grounded in social inequities. The lack of aesthetic empowerment is also a product of Corner's 'state of distraction' whereby a community, unknowingly, live between bounded landscapes of 'significance'. Significance of place is dictated by a sign, a plaque or a historic marker as opposed to a process of self discovery and reflectivity. Lowenthal (1969, p. 111) discusses this dilemma, "Signposts reduce historical experience from environmental flux to the kind of order found in history books; they make the visible past feel more like a written record." Like a designated 'scenic overpass' or , these places are 'politicized' spaces where society is programmed to practice the act of *seeing*.

The Downtown Des Moines River is a highly politicized landscape. Annual art festivals and musical events take place along the downtown river without any reflective engagement with the river. The river is merely a backdrop preceded by the event or the act. Not unlike Jackson's (1986, p. 69) *political* landscapes where "the political landscape largely ignores topography in favour of strategic or economic strong points", economics on the downtown river precedes the landscape experience. Jackson's observation, though referring to the medieval ages, pervades widely in today's urban design schemes. Kaliski (1999, p. 96) examines the current design transition of the architect/designer to urban policy maker, "At worst, this type of urban design, initially motivated by an appreciation of the existing city, has ironically become complicit in the production of homogenous urban spaces, the ubiquitous 'festival' marketplaces and 'old towns' that dot the American urban landscape." In between these 'festivals' we have lost the landscape experience.

Perhaps even before we concern ourselves with the programmatic and aesthetic qualities of our designs, we ought to step back and divert more effort in exploring how society perceives a space, place or a landscape today. We need to practice in a mode that captures the *community* in the act of *seeing*. To operate in such a mode, the cinematic screen proved worthy.

THE MOVING IMAGERY

You people. If there isn't a movie made about it, it's not worth knowing, is it?

Alan Rickman a.k.a. Metatron

Dogma



Figure 4. An idealized of the Des Moines skyline with the Downtown Des Moines River trickling beside it.

We live in an age powered by the *image*, and even more so by the *moving imagery*. *Moving imagery* in this study refers to film, movies, television, video or animated sequences representing movement through the successional changes in images to using visual, aural and temporal devices. In *Attachment to the Ordinary Landscape*, Riley (1992, p. 29) described the disappearance of the landscape idea in today's image-oriented society:

... contemporary information- and image oriented society is far less dependent on place than any society that has preceded it. Many human activities take place independently of place; many can be described as almost aspatial.

... as our dependence on place withers, our knowledge of landscape images increase. It is common lore that until the nineteenth century, most all people were born, grew up, lived and died within a five-mile radius. Transportation and communication have destroyed that landscape naïveté forever.

In the early years of television and film, cultural and mass communication studies had concentrated their efforts on the effects of the moving imagery on the general populace (Bellman 1977, Belton 1996, Jarvie 1978, White 1968). Though largely concerned with the propaganda and symbolic transmissions of this new mass-media, the use of the medium itself as an academic tool have been examined as well (Cons 1959, Harris 1964, Collier and Collier 1986). Among the academic disciplines, visual anthropology stood at the frontlines in using the video medium profusely as a data collection and analysis device (Devereaux and Hilman 1995, Hockings 1995). This heavily criticized approach was indeed ahead of its time given its interdisciplinary overtones (Winston 1995). Despite the criticisms, other disciplines have followed suit to develop the use of film and video outside the context of ethnography. Urban theorist, William Whyte (1980), used cameras and film techniques to a great degree when studying cultural practices in plazas, parks and sidewalks in New York. His seminal study, *The Social Life of Small Urban Places* (Whyte 1980) remains as a standard text for urban planners, sociologist, landscape architecture and architecture departments today.

In studying the relationship between humans and the landscapes they inhabit, the image had transformed landscape knowledge and experiences into enclosed entities on matte prints, theater screens and pixels on a television monitor. Historian, Daniel Boorstin (qtd. in Winetrout 1968, p. 381) posed a cautionary note for the image-oriented society:

... this image-dominated culture has made for seconhandedness. "The Grand Canyon itself becomes a disappointing reproduction of the Kodachrome original." Fantasy becomes more real than reality. There is a loss of spontaneity. We are busy contriving events, "pseudo events" he calls them. We are so dedicated in creating images from cigarettes to presidents that ideals are secondary, images primary. "Photography becomes a form of narcissism. "Have you seen MY snapshot of the Mona Lisa?"

This narcissistic view can be traced back to early landscape paintings. Early scenic art makers manufactured representations of their physical surroundings with precision. What seemed like mere imitations of natural landscapes or scenes involved a dialectic approach to deconstruct landscape narratives into background, middleground and foreground elements. In *Spaces*, GreenBie (1981, p. ix) reflects on theater as a field of scenic productions to explain his concept of the landscape:

Despite the presumption of many people that scenic art deals with flimsy illusions, stage design at its best is far more demanding functionally than creations most architects have been allowed to get away with. If things don't work in a psychological and behavioral sense, as well as a practical one, an irate director and the actors let the designer know in a hurry. Somewhat later, I found theater to have excellent training for design activities in the larger theater call the landscape.

Film or movies have taken the notion of landscape as a theater further by incorporating the landscape into a physical theater and onto a framed view. Coming out of the twentieth century as a recognized art form, film has been a subject of both social and psychological inquiry. Considered as the seventh art, motion pictures and television have been described as devices of societal consensus, agents of social change, tools of politics, and instruments for education and enlightenment (White 1968, p. 3).

Nature was brought to us by the *National Geographic Explorer* (Ballard 1985), American suburbia through *Growing Pains* (Marlens 1985) and *Wonder Years* (Marlens and Black 1988), prairie landscapes through *Little House on a Prairie* (Landon 1974), and fantasy environments through *The Twilight Zone* (Sterling 1959). *Singles* (Crowe 1992) painted a musical portrait of Seattle, Washington while *Mulholland Drive* (Lynch 2001) and *L.A. Confidential* (Hanson 1997) revealed the inner workings of Hollywood and Los Angeles City. You would learn more about New York through Tim “Speed” Levitch’s undying affair with the city in *The Cruise* (Miller 1998) than any number of visits to the Big Apple combined.

The moving imagery has influenced, to a great degree, the way I perceive, interpret, and interact with landscapes. I was never trained in the traditional arts per se. I see a static screen when I peruse a 17th century Lorrain painting. Similarly, I see framed landscapes in a theater screen or a television box. As a recording and representation of our everyday environments, a filmed landscape has a built-in reality quotient. I do not assume the screen or the television set as a medium, but rather, a heightened reality.

As I settle my senses and become absorbed into a movie, the screen is transparent and the manipulation of a landscape in film ‘reality’ becomes translucent and elusive. Given the widespread use of image-manipulation, the moving imagery, in all its manifestation, is a more ‘consumable’ reality compared to paintings or photographs. I had become a consequence of Riley’s (1992) image-oriented society.



Figure 5. The pan or panorama, a cinematographic term, provides a visual field that mimics a human's visual field 'scanning' across a landscape.

Boorstin's (Winetrout 1968, p. 381) concern reminded me of the Japanese stereotype we see in movies. He is always handy with a photographic device, documenting his every move and sight in every exotic location he finds himself in. The image he captures is the only 'physical' evidence of his 'real-time' presence in the landscape. In witnessing himself and the filmed landscape on a television screen in a later time, he validates the memory of his physical presence in the landscape through reflectivity and remembrance. Helphand (1986, p. 1) talks of such a physical and psychological journey through film:

We experience a cinematic déjà vu on streets that recall movie studio back lots, in London fogs, when riding a wild river, or even in a shower. In addition, many have noted the environmental aspect of film, and its encompassing quality of total immersion. We sometimes travel and even dwell within this cinematic landscape: journeying around the globe, going off into space, or visiting places in the imagined past of anticipated future.

In filming the Downtown Des Moines River, my cinematic *déjà vu* brought me back to Pare Lorentz's 'river' and other rivers alike. One river in particular sits 9,500 miles away from Des Moines, Iowa.



Figure 6. In filming the Downtown Des Moines River.

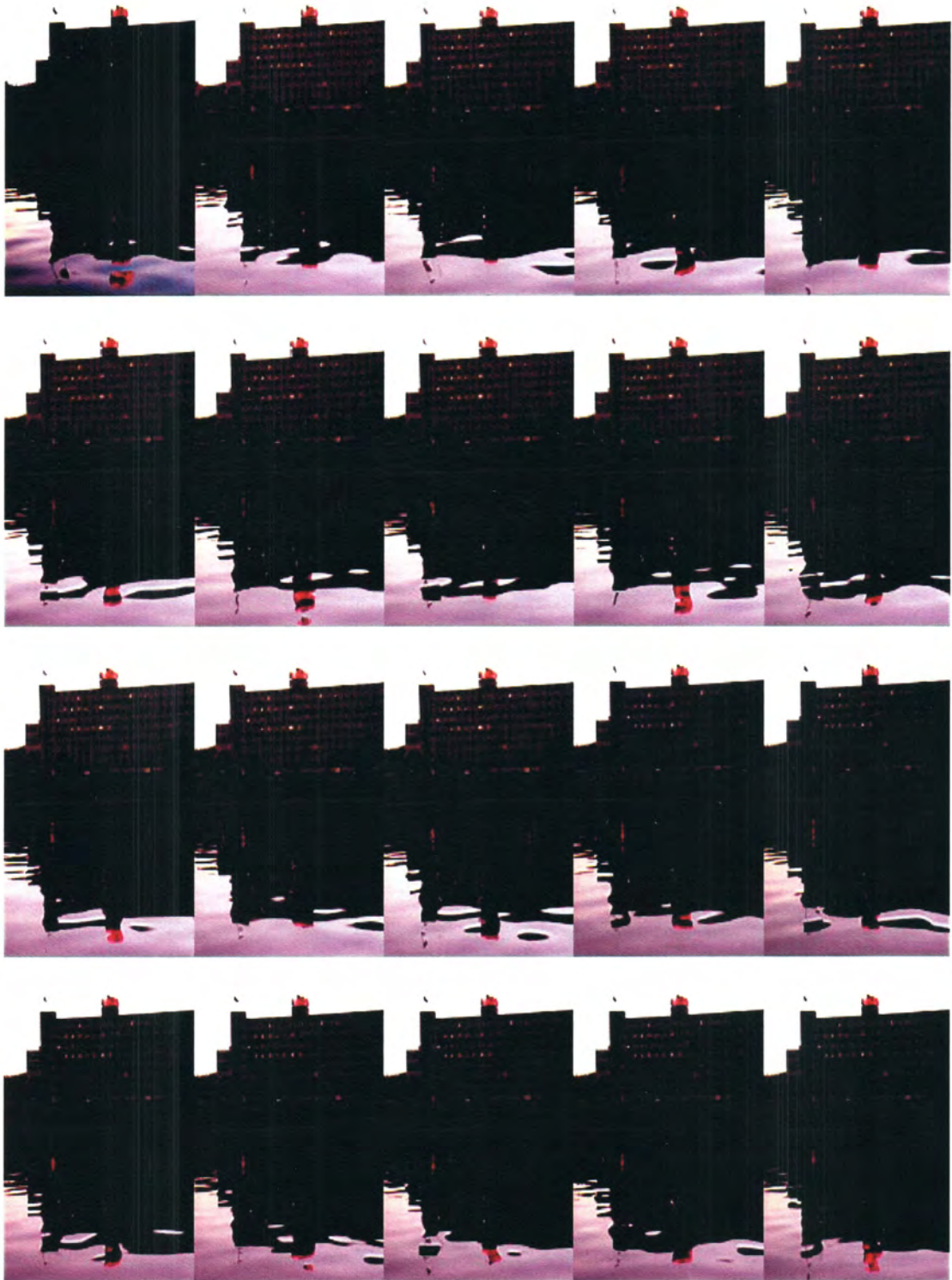


Figure 7. A film strip capturing the shimmering like on the downtown river. The water shimmers with the YMCA neon sign like a beacon by the river.

RETURN TO THE RIVERTOWN

*A Phone call to Des Moines
How are you? Are you OK?
Is the water high where you are?
Do not wade in the water and play.
Stay off the streets in your car.
I worry about you. Best to stay
In your home if you can. I shiver
when I think of you so far away
as I see the strength of your river.
It is debris and rain and mud
Scented by fear of disaster and the
Tears of years and the flash of flood
Everywhere coming faster.
But how many times can you hang on,
Or get in a boat and travel,
Or seek pure water that is almost gone?
Or sit on a bridge and unravel the
awesome scene of city brave that
someone like you would like to save.*

Helen Harrington

As I stood by Walnut St. Bridge for the umpteenth time, the scenery over the bridge had changed considerably. In the summer of 2003, the riverwalk was fully visible. The water was at its lowest level that I've ever seen. Sandbars upon sandbars would dot the length of the walk on the east side while submerged items in the spring reveal themselves, peaking out of the shallow wakes. My major enlightenment over the year was having witnessed the downtown river through the four seasons. Water levels rose and fell while the days elongated and diminished in duration. Over the year, the downtown river remained calm and unscathed.

With a bevy of footage and literary sources, I began to compose the film and this essay. I tried to recall specifically when I began my journeys to this rivertown and it dawned on me there were two instances vying for that momentous occasion.

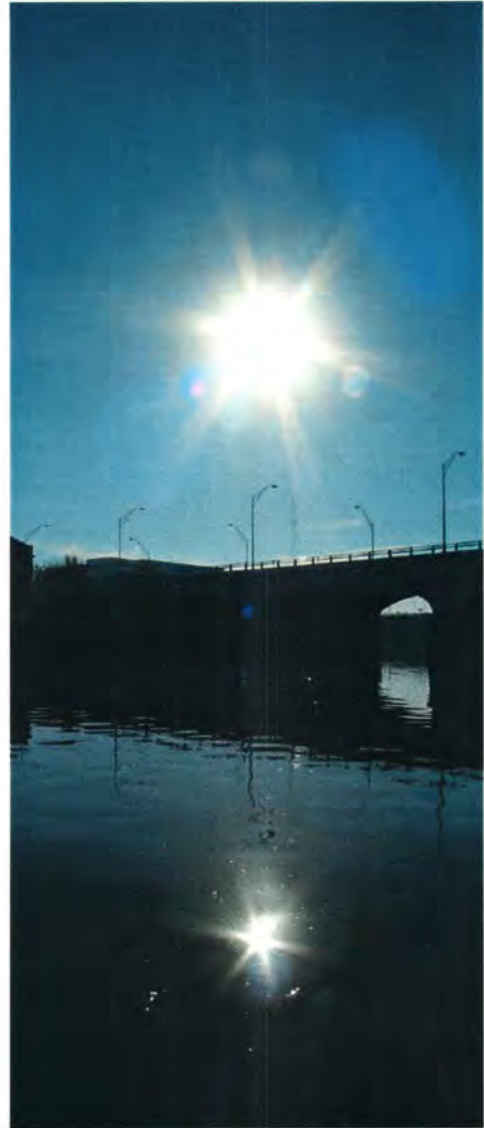


Figure 8. Looking over Walnut Bridge on a Sunday morning

The first instance, the more official of the two, began in May of 2002. That year the Scottish Sculpture Workshop (2002) offered a research residency seeking a creative individual to develop ‘new’ stories about the village and its surroundings. The project aimed to stimulate awareness in the significance of the landscape to those who inhabit it whilst exploring it as a resource for creativity. At the back of my mind, I pictured Lumsden as a new village or a derelict town in search of its identity to reinvigorate its community. On visiting Lumsden’s webpage, the opening passage surprised me. Douglas McMann (2001) wrote:

Nestling in the foothills of the Eastern Grampian Mountains, the village of Lumsden is one which is very easily overlooked... unless that is, you are looking for a quiet, tranquil paradise set amidst countryside which has some of the most under-rated and unparalleled views over vast areas of unspoiled Scottish uplands. A veritable heaven for hillwalkers of all abilities, anglers searching for the ever elusive trout, sea-trout and Atlantic Salmon, birdwatchers and nature lovers of all types, the Lumsden area is one which has, over the years, been sadly neglected at the expense of its more widely known neighbor, “Royal Deeside”. But maybe that has been a blessing...

This text was followed by a short but poignant historical account rich in drama and tragedies. It was liberating and inspiring to encounter a landscape rich in cultural and geographical history that foresaw the need to develop ‘new’ stories not solely for the purposes of tourism, but to discover and perpetuate a sense of place.

The second event that brought me to this rivertown was in fact, another rivertown. In retrospect, my association with the Downtown Des Moines River began twenty-six years ago.

I was born and raised in the river city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Like most civilizations, Kuala Lumpur, meaning ‘muddy estuary’, sat at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak River. Driving over their bridges always made me look for a meander of sorts. I would lean over as far as I could to catch a glimpse of people fishing or kayakers or even couples just taking a stroll. Over time, that image became too exotic. In two hundred years, about the same age as Des Moines, Kuala Lumpur had developed exponentially from a mining town to a metropolitan of 2.5 million residents. Throughout those years, the city was underwater frequently. Torrential rain would bring flash floods during much of the monsoon season between May and September annually. Within my lifetime in Malaysia, I have witnessed the transformation of the two rivers into monstrous monsoon drains in the name of flood control. It is not a river anymore but a conduit of all that is excess. Interestingly, this course of events would bear a resemblance to what would be my new home.

My ideation of an American sense of place began in the Midwest. I have moved from Malaysia to Iowa to further my education. I had lived in Ames, Iowa, for three years as an

undergraduate student, and three years for my graduate degree. In between those periods, I've worked and lived in Dutch Harbor, Alaska; Seattle, Washington; Anaheim, California; Woods Hole, Massachusetts; and Virginia Beach, Virginia. My last job took me along much of the eastern coast of America, from Maine to North Carolina. In every new place, the question of my origins and my journeys would arise when I engage the local community.

Inevitably, in describing Ames, I would allude to Des Moines, Iowa's state capital as a frame of reference. Regrettably, my Des Moines description would stop there. Thinking back, I found my brief knowledge of Des Moines rather odd. I had lived thirty miles away from Des Moines for three years and I had been there countless times, yet I knew very little of it. The descriptions of my birthplace were not entirely satisfying either. They were grounded in memories of disturbing events.

I would return to the Midwest in the year 2000. I enrolled for a graduate degree in Landscape Architecture at Iowa State University in hopes of specializing in Geographical Information Systems, an industry jargon for digital mapping no less. Yet the program gave me much more than technical proficiency in the art of mapping. The program gave me a fresh set of eyes.

As fate dictates, my encounters with Des Moines grew in frequency through numerous design studio projects. My class trips to the state capital were usually brief and unsatisfying. During each of trip I would recall my initial memory of Des Moines yet the event never revealed itself again. In searching for a thesis study, I lucked upon a book and in it, a prose that brought me back to Des Moines and its river indefinitely. In Larry A. Stone's (1999, p. 24), *Listen to the Land*:

To learn about the land and its people, explore its rivers.

Is there corn on the edge of the bank, or does the stream wind through a cathedral of trees? Does the water sparkle and dance through riffles, or ooze along like spilled chocolate milk?

Walk, or paddle, the waterfront of a river town. Is it littered with the discards of a throw away society—or vibrant and active with people drawn to its magic?

Do valley residences speak reverently of a prized natural resource—or plot ways to defeat a hated enemy?

Physically and philosophically, Iowa's rivers have helped shaped her character.



Figure 9. Kids on a concrete 'slide' by Center St. Dam.



Figure 10. With a fresh set of eyes, the waterstained retaining walls along the downtown river became clear and highly detectable.

‘NEW’ LANDSCAPE NARRATIVES

To recover and renew the language of landscape is to discover and imagine new metaphors, to tell new stories.

Ann Spirn
The Language of Landscape

Where do we begin? This statement begs anticipation. It foretells an impending event; a story, a narrative to take us on a cognitive journey limited only by the audiences’ imagination. By definition, a narrative describes a plot, an event, or an account. Potteiger and Purinton (1998a) described a narrative as “both the story, what is told, and the means of telling, implying both product and process, for and formation, structure and structuration.” Likewise, Lucy Lippard (1997, p. 9) expressed how “every place name is a story, an outcropping of the shared tales that form the bedrock of community. Untold land is unknown land.” In embedding the narrative idea to a landscape, the narrative could become not only a descriptor of place, but a signifier of place identity, place attachment, and other cultural processes inherent in the creation of place. Tilley (qtd. in Basu 1997) describes:

... when a story becomes sedimented into the landscape, the story and the place dialectically helps to construct and reproduce each other. Places help to recall stories that are associated with them, and places exist (as named locales) by virtue of their employment in a narrative. Places, like persons, have biographies inasmuch as they are formed, used and transformed in relation to practice. It can be argued that stories acquire part of their mythic value and historical relevance if they are rooted in the concrete details of locales in the landscape, acquiring material reference points that can be visited, seen and touched.

Narratives have propagated culture through the oral tradition, material culture, the written word, photo records and, more recently, video records. From these modes, narratives were inferred by geographers, anthropologists, archaeologists and geologists describe human-spatial relationships. Conversely, writers, painters, playwrights, directors, architects, landscape architects and designers utilize the same modes to produce a narrative. The landscape idea too, has grown to assume attributes of the cultural propagation modes mentioned. In the earliest cave paintings in Lascaux, France (Aujoulat 1998) and later in documentaries such as *Baraka* (Fricke 2001), landscape representations have grown from a framed representation termed *landskip* to a postmodern multifunctional landscape idea that is layered with phenomenological meanings and signifiers.

Potteiger and Purinton prescribed three schemes in which people use to construct meaning in language, narrative and landscapes in design practices: narrative experiences; associations and references; and memory landscapes (Table 1). Similarly, post-structuralists use of landscape symbology are inherent in narrative constructions based on literary theories. Potteiger and Purinton explains how designers can distill or append narratives to landscapes through literary associations (Table 2). These landscape association tools are used to reflect how a landscape is to be read. Nevertheless, Potteiger and Purinton (1999, p. x) cautioned how some landscape narratives driven designs are too literal:

While these projects do begin to engage and speak to the public in a more accessible design language, they tend to present already codified versions of stories. These “one-liners” fail to resonate with other dimensions of experience—with the narratives implicit in materials, in processes, and in ordinary practices of landscape drawing boundaries and excavating, preserving, or demolishing landscapes. To extend landscape narrative beyond the literal requires attention to how people read stories in the landscape.



Figure 11. Narratives begin with a book, a shimmering light, a cool shade, and a moist lawn.

Narrative Experiences Routines, rituals, or events that represent narrative structures; e.g. festivals, processions, reenactments, pilgrimage, daily journeys, crossing a threshold.	Tours and rituals enact narratives, selecting and organizing the experience of place into temporal sequences. Des Moines host annual events in the name of the river through the Two Rivers Art Expo and the 'Nitefall by the River' music concerts.
Associations and References Elements in the landscape that become connected with experience, event, history, religious allegory, or other forms of narrative.	Street signs serve as metaphors and metonymies of events that occurred. Dragoon Trail signs were created to trace the movement of the Dragoons, an English infantry during early military surveys in Des Moines and most of Iowa.
Memory Landscapes Places that serve as the tangible locus of memory, both political and personal.	A stone monument sits next to Sec Taylor Stadium in Des Moines. It serves as a location marker for the Fort Des Moines 2, Des Moines' humble beginnings.

Table 1. Types of landscape narratives. (Adapted from Potteiger and Purinton 1998, p. 11)

Metaphor	Operates on the linguistic principles of substitution and similarity
Metonymy	Constructing meaning by association
Synecdoche	The use of a part of something to represent the whole, or of the whole to stand for a part (indicator species)
Irony	The in-betweenness of things, It is an affirmation of both/and as well as neither this or that.

Table 2. The nature of landscape narratives (Adapted from Potteiger and Purinton 1998, p. 31-38).

In examining how Des Moinesians read stories of the Downtown Des Moines River, it was crucial to determine the nature of existing narratives. Searching for existing historical and contemporary narratives of the Downtown Des Moines River and Des Moines was overwhelming and discouraging at the same time. The search was by no means exhaustive, but it revealed the nature of the existing local narratives.

Collected findings consisted of literary works, audio tape recordings and video documentaries. The diversity of literary work included chronicles or historical, reports, journalistic news, research or anecdotal accounts.

Surprisingly, the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce has been the driving force behind prominent 'historical' publications. Over the past five decades, numerous coffee-table historical literature and photo essays have been produced (Dahl 1978, Davis and Ellis 1999, Gammack and Erickson, Long 2003). Similar in content and scope, these publications dedicated a quarter of their content to corporate identities. However, other historical accounts sponsored by government agencies did exist (Page and Rogers 1997).



Figure 12. The Grand Avenue Bridge have been reconstructed numerous times over the course of Des Moines development. The plaque 'commemorates' a time when the downtown river raged and destroyed many a bridge along the river.

Government reports were relegated to planning documents, maps, recreational masterplans, directories and architectural reports (Baldwin 1929, City of Des Moines Planning Dept. 1992, Denny 1993, Agrest and Gandelsonas 1992, Hammer 1947, Pratt 1971, USACE 1987). The Des Moines Register and other journalistic accounts, perhaps, provided the bulk of narratives about the Downtown Des Moines. As several local historians pointed out, to become an expert on Des Moines' affairs, one should turn to your everyday newspaper (Christian 2003, Zeller 2003a). Other significant publications included research, anecdotal publications penned by journalist, local pioneers (Heusinkveld 1989, Hussey 1919, Mills 1991). Fictional accounts included a romance novel (Brigham 1927) and a satiric account of Des Moines' 'peccadillos' entitled *Let's Keep Des Moines a Private Joke* (Hunter 1982).

Audio narrative recordings comprised of a cassette collection named 'Oral Histories' (Public Library of Des Moines 1989). The recordings were largely conducted by the Public Library of Des Moines. These voices from the past provided rich descriptions of Des Moines in different periods of its development. A thorough transcriptions of the series could not be found yet their significance in yielding 'untold' narratives were not discounted.

Video records found were of historical, journalistic and educational nature. The list of videos included personal archival film transfers, an educational guide to a series of watersheds in Iowa (IPTV 1985), visual narratives of the recent floods of 1993 (KCCI-TV 1993 and WOI-TV 1993), and a short thirty minute historic narrative of Des Moines (Trasher n.d.) made roughly in the early eighties respectively. To an extent, this short list of video material revealed a void in contemporary narratives of Des Moines and its downtown river. However, therein laid the opportunity to develop 'new' local narratives. To develop 'new' narratives, the local *resident community* was engaged.



Figure 13. The Court Avenue Bridge lighting was part of the riverfront redesign out of *The River Book* (City of Des Moines Planning Dept. 1992) planning report.



Figure 14. Water Street is a metonymy for the downtown river's ravaging past. As the closest man made path next to the river, the surface condition of the street was usually determined by the river's tide.

THE DRIVE

I started out thinking of America as highways and state lines. As I got to know it better, I began to think of it as rivers. Most of what I love about the country is a gift of the rivers. . . . America is a great story, and there is a river on every page of it.

Charles Kuralt
On the Road With Charles Kuralt



Figure 15. Drifting in and out of sleep on a morning drive, the scenery dissolves into plain hues and shades.

Between the fall of 2002 and the spring of 2004, the Downtown Des Moines River became my backyard. Using a Canon ZR-45MC camcorder, I began an experiential journey of the filmic kind which led to the production of *Looking Closer: The Downtown Des Moines River Narratives*. The film was a combination of historical and contemporary narratives compiled through interviews with the local resident community.

The weekly trips began in the fall of 2002. Twice a week, I would greet each sunrise with much enthusiasm, up until the point where my trip to downtown Des Moines begins. My senses would usually drift off as I cruised along US30. Involuntarily, my pulse would always quicken and snap me back to reality when I reached the exit-turn towards Des Moines.

Snow came early that October. Autumn came and went as fast as the snow melted. Through my windshield, the changing scene became repetitious over time. After innumerable trips to Des Moines and back from Ames for two years, my sense of location along I-35 has grown immensely. Like a boat pilot who remembers sandbars and river depths by color to map a river, I oriented myself on I-35 through moments, overpasses and radio towers.

Each time I crossed the South Skunk River heading south, I knew I have left Ames for good. This crossing also marked the beginning of a thirty-mile drive to downtown Des Moines. The Huxley and Cambridge exits should appear six miles later and after that, two mulch piles should crawl the horizon. Another minute later, I should pass the white work-shed with a 'Lunde' sign on its east façade .

Half way to Des Moines, I should see an overpass adjacent to a radio tower soaring over a red barn. At this point my eyes would usually focus on a neatly planted windbreak that shelters a white quaint farm house with a run-down barn. By then, I should have crossed the county line from Story County into Polk County.

As I pass the Otter Creek Golf Course, I can almost see the golf ball on a tee. The golf course should be fifteen miles away from downtown. My radio should begin to crackle at this point. KCCQ 105.1 of Ames is usually inaudible at this range. It might be just my antenna.



Figure 16. Navigating through downtown Des Moines is primarily a vehicular affair. Pedestrians are well removed from the street level to the plush confines of the skywalk.

The SuperTarget and Home Depot billboards should mark my arrival to Ankeny and five miles closer to my destination. To my left would be the Tones Spice factory and the Ankeny Regional airport and to my right, modular houses and mall-strips. From this point on, I-35 should become a six-lane dual carriageway.

Turning left, I should connect to I-235 and be heading towards the State Capitol Building. Looking right, industries would give way to ranch houses and abruptly, into large business complexes. Before taking the 6th Street exit, I will cross the Des Moines River for the first time. The exit should take me towards the Vets Auditorium. As always, construction would be ongoing for the Iowa Events Center on the west riverfront.

I would make my way through downtown Des Moines and onto Locust Street, stopping along the Locust Street Bridge. Flanked by the Des Moines Public Library to my right and the YMCA on my left, I would get out of my car and walk towards the edge of the bridge.

On occasion, I would scout for potential participants for my study, but more often than not, I would be by the YMCA, chatting up homeless individuals who seem to have an intimate attachment to the downtown river. Yet for this study to succeed in capturing the breadth of narratives available, the study would require participants that reflected the broad range of users and non-users of the downtown river. I would refer to this socially or physically unbounded entity as my *resident community*.

By definition, the *resident community* refers to an ad hoc group that interacts with the site directly and indirectly. Since socially and spatially, the present downtown Des Moines has no designated or well defined residential neighborhood, the *resident community* refers to a highly diverse group of individuals. Downtown Des Moines residents, commuters from neighboring suburbs and towns, the occasional jogger on the John Pat Dorrian Trail, the weekday anglers, and summer paddlers are all part of the resident community. To collect narratives from such a broad range of groups, individuals were interviewed based on their demographic and the extent of physical interactions with the downtown Des Moines River.



Figure 17. The end of the drive marks this weekly ritual. Drawn towards the edge of Locust St. Bridge, this platform became a my first sampling station, my gauge for changes on the downtown river.

The interview protocol applied on the resident community also reflected spatial properties via imaging and word association exercises. The interviews were simple, open ended, straightforward and conversational in nature. It began with basic demographic oriented questions comprised of age, occupation and length of residency in Des Moines. What followed were a series of questions and exercises pertaining to the downtown Des Moines, the participants' extent of interactivity with the downtown river, and known narratives of the downtown river. Each question was asked in no particular order:

1. *What is the first thing that comes to mind when people mention Des Moines to you?*
2. *What constitutes the Downtown Des Moines neighborhood?*
3. *Do you ever visit the Downtown Des Moines River? If yes, for what purpose.*
4. *Write six words that you associate with the Downtown Des Moines River*
5. *Draw a place on the Downtown Des Moines River. It may be real or imagined.*
6. *Describe how you feel about the Downtown Des Moines River.*
7. *Describe how your community feels about the Downtown Des Moines River.*
8. *Describe a story you know, have heard or seen about the Downtown Des Moines River.*

The participants ranged from corporate directors to homeless individuals. Their ages also reflected the wide demographic that the study hoped to capture. Some were in their early teens while several participants were in their seventies. All participants had lived in Des Moines for at least a year and had interacted with the river at least once in their lifetime. Their knowledge of the downtown river however, did not reflect any strong awareness of the river's cultural and historical significance. Most participants noted that the river was just a road, referring to the bridge crossings in the process. They just went over it. The downtown river is a transitional landscape, and no doubt, an ordinary landscape, unbounded and undefined. It is a just river and not the Downtown Des Moines River. On the first question, only one participant associated the river with Des Moines.

What constitutes the Downtown Des Moines neighborhood? The closest neighborhoods mentioned by several participants included the newly designated East Village west of the State Capitol and Sherman Hill, a restored Victorian neighborhood ten blocks away northwest from downtown. The East Village initiated the process to repopulation of downtown Des Moines but given the scattered residences and businesses, an apparent 'neighborhood' is still in its infancy. Despite all that, Mary Kay-Wilcox, a local city planner, agrees that there is no coherent neighborhood in downtown Des Moines. "There needs to be a core or residences that shape a neighborhood in Des Moines. With the existing infrastructure, it is difficult to say that downtown Des Moines can have any sign of a strong neighborhood identity," she explained.



Figure 18. The cast of *Looking Closer* was diverse in age and occupational status.

AMPHITHEATER AMPHITHEATER AMPHITHEATER
 AMPHITHEATER AMPHITHEATER AWESOME BARS
 BEAUTIFUL BIG BIG CITY BIG INSURANCE TOWN
 BIG SMALL TOWN BORING BORING BORING BRIDGE
 BRIDGE BRIDGE BRIDGE BROWN BUMS CAMPING
 CENTERED COLD COLD CONCRETE DAMS DAMS
 DARK DECEPTION DEAD DEEP DESOLATION
 DIRTY DIRTY DIRTY DOWNTOWN DRINKING
 DRINKING DRUGS DRUNK ESCAPE FAST MOVING
 FLAT FISHING FISHY FREEDOM FRUSTRATION
 FRUSTRATION FRUSTRATION FUN GREEN HOMELESS
 HOPE I LIKE IT I LOVE IT I LIVE IT ISOLATION
 IGNORED LIKE LIVE LOOP LOVE MIDDLE MUSIC
 NIGHTLIFE PAIN PEOPLE PRINCIPAL BUILDING
 PRINCIPALBUILDINGPRINCIPALBUILDINGPRINCIPAL
 BUILDING PRINCIPAL BUILDING RAPIDS RIVER
 SKYWALK SKYWALK SKYWALK SKYWALK SLEEPING
 UNDER A BRIDGE SMELL SOOTHING STAYING
 SURPRISING SWIFT VAST UNDERAPPRECIATED
 UNDERAPPRECIATED UNDERAPPRECIATED
 UNKEMPT UNPLEASANT VAST WALKING
 WARM WATERFALL WELL KEPT WIDE BRIDGE

Figure 19. The word association exercise revealed an array of attitude towards Des Moines. Some used phrases instead of words..

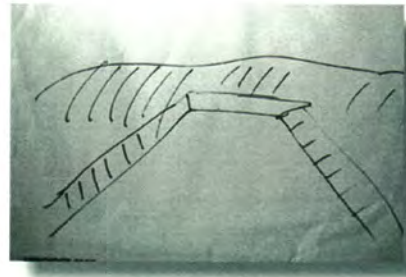
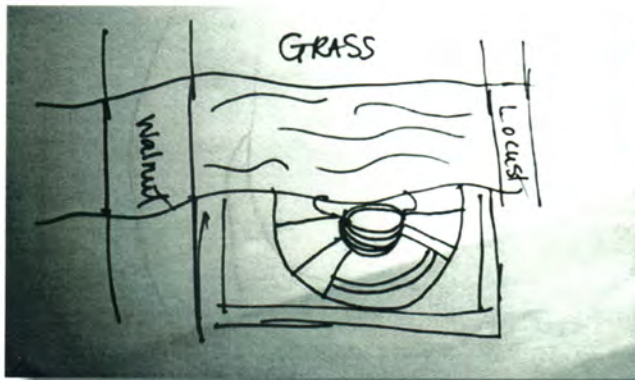
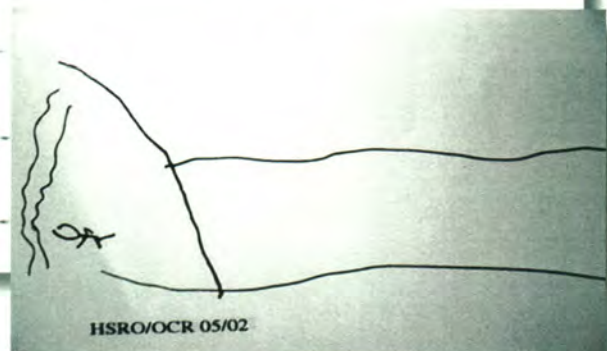
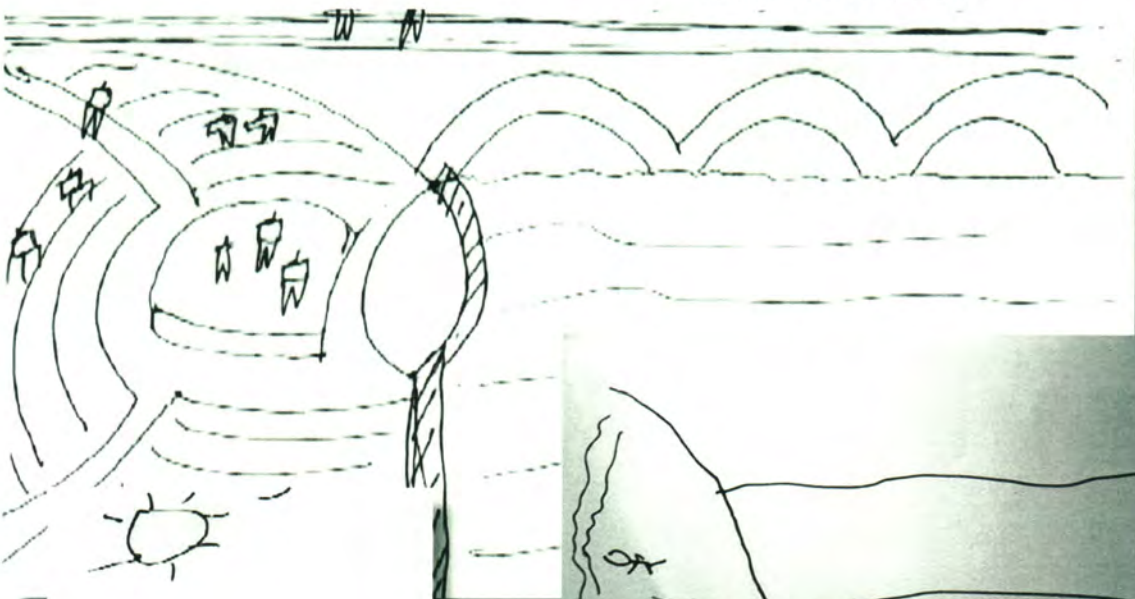
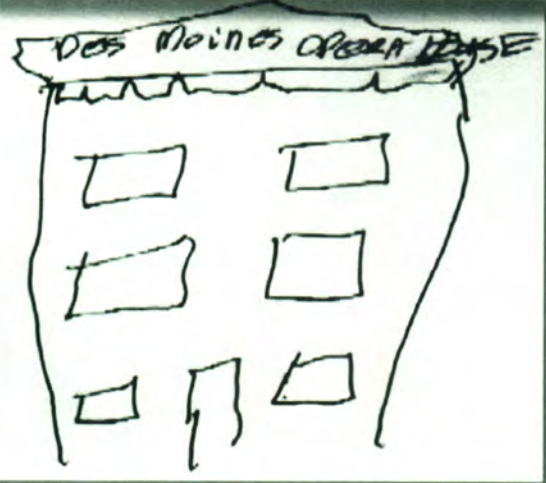


Figure 20. White elephants and jay walkers; the imaging exercise revealed idealized and identifiable landscapes. Traumatic and memorable events also surfaced through the drawings.



HSRO/OCR 05/02



It was interesting to witness the imaging process. Most drawings showed prominent landmarks on the river. The Simon Ester Riverfront Amphitheater in particular was the most common portrait. Dams would be another popular image. The river was a focal point among the anglers. Imaginary landscapes were also present in the mix. Mushroom toadstools and great tree canopies were idealized natural landscapes of what the downtown river could have been. Some drew jogging trails and walking stick figures on a sunny day. Traumatic events can be seen from one sketch that pictured a person under a bridge and in the river itself. Perhaps it signified an apparent suicide. The majority of the sketches were of architectural forms. Only two sketches depicted the downtown river's meander.

Idealized and imaginary landscapes demonstrates an act of reflectivity and remembrance. Eidetic processes are at work to produce a vivid recollection of the landscape ideal, be it real or imagined. However, event-based associations through subjective placement of oneself 'acting' in the landscape provided a deeper understanding of self-imaging rather than the landscape experience. Like watching an advertisement for a travel cruise package, the viewers' fun and exhilarating experiences were lived out and reinforced by actors in the advert. The experience could be anywhere. The memory of a fun concert or a healthy stroll by the river as an act in the landscape relegates the landscape idea into a setting, thus lacking in any true active engagement with the landscape per se. Nevertheless traumatic events such as the death in the river are well grounded in the landscape.

In tandem with events and programmatic architectural forms on the downtown river, it is clear that most image-associations with the downtown river illustrates a detachment from the river and a strong affinity for the events by the 'built river'.

Through conversations, word associations and imaging exercises, participants revealed their sense of place of the subject matter, both verbally and visually. My role in the interview process served only as a recording device. A traditional survey method reduces the individual into statistical devices. It may serve to generalize attitudes and perceptions pertaining to a site but given the diversity of individuals, age, occupation, and location of residence, the narrative analysis approach invoke richer information in lieu of traditional reductive surveys. The conversational approach empowers the participant to answer and vocalize without fear of reprisal from 'expert' opinions. The participants were fully responsible of his or her words thus remaining as the expert on the Downtown Des Moines River. Inevitably, in participating in the film, the participants became the main cast of *Looking Closer* and in 'designing' the film, I became part of the *resident community* as well.

IN 'DESIGNING' A FILM

*When you put your hand in a flowing stream, you touch the last that has gone before
and the first of what is still to come.*

Leonardo da Vinci

A monotonous cone of vision can be dangerous when driving on the interstate. After numerous trips to Des Moines, my visual acumen became desensitized. My mind would usually float between previous encounters with local Des Moinesians and negotiating truck passes. Like a *parallel montage*, my mind will drift out of repetitious processes into events that require higher brain activity such as reflection and memory.

Parallel montages is a cinematic tool used to describe the notion of multiple stories or narratives transpiring at the same 'time'. Likewise, *cross-cutting* between scenes from two different sequences, often in different locales, usually suggest that they are occurring at the same time (Gianetti 1987, p. 469), but that is not always the case. *Last Year at Marienbad* (Renaud 1961) articulated a film style that utilizes *cross-cutting* heavily to shape a tale of rendezvous, murder and lost love. Viewers can get lost in 'film' space as the murder, lost love, and rendezvous scenes are mixed and matched into three different montages running in a non-linear fashion. The clues to reconstituting a linear narrative were embedded in landscapes and landscape paintings through different scenes. The formal gardens shown in the movie were allegories for concealment and secrecy. These metaphors and symbols become clues for reconstructing a linear narrative from a series of jumbled scenes. Scattered like forensic evidence in a murder scene, one must thoroughly dissect each scene, each shot and possibly, even each frame.

Similarly, in *Memento* (Nolan 2000), the narrative sequencing was disjuncted and presented unconventionally. The narrative was told backwards. In between the scenes of the main



Figure 21. The 'under the bridge' metaphor projects a programmatic riverwalk where social ills and celebrations coincide.

narrative, clues were laid out in black and white scenes as opposed to the major narrative. Again, the clues to how the narrative retains its original sequence is predicated upon objects, artifacts, and overlapping landscapes.

We experience landscapes with all of our senses. Short of translating electrical impulses of one's brain onto a physical screen, the study of spatial perception and its phenomenological components is compounded by modes of representation. If the evidence of how our culture perceives the landscape today is inherent in film and television media, designers will need to educate themselves on how to read the filmic language and its operative modes in presenting landscapes. Film techniques and theories can be practiced to train our design sense. In *Landscape Films*, Helphand (1986) provided a compelling framework geared towards a new landscape design sensibility. He analyzed how films portray landscapes as settings, objects, characters, or symbols (Table 3).

The act of producing a film serves to open and enhance our senses to fully comprehend the landscape experience we set out to construct. Potteiger and Purinton (1998, p. 12) describe:

The literary or film devices of plotting, foreshadowing, fading, and jumping cutting all have their spatial equivalents... And even without reference, analogy, borrowed plots, or fiction can reveal its own biography of weathering, histories of use, institutional practices, rituals, growth, adaptation, and decline."

The list of film 'design' concepts and its landscape equivalents are endless. Comprehension of film techniques can be applied to spatial interventions (Table 4). Bernard Tschumi's winning entry for the *Parc de la Villette* competition used cinematic framing and sequencing to transcribe an 'archetype' of a murder manifested through architectural interventions (Tschumi 1987). Films perpetuate a 'heightened reality' of a narrative through imagery and sound. Through this association, a spatial dimension is created. The placement of imagery thus becomes crucial. Bellman and Rosette (1977, p. 8) explain the logical approach to image sequencing or a *predispositional montage*:

If there were two different shots, one of a small cottage, then a dissolve to an elderly man reading a book in a den, it is interpretable by the audience that 'there is a cottage and within it is a man reading a book.' If, on the other hand, the shots were reversed, the interpretation would be 'there is a man reading a book about a cottage.

The cinematographic technique of *mise-en-scène* have far reaching consequences in spatial design. Gianetti (1987, p. 472) defines it as:

The arrangement of visual weights of and movements within a given space. In the live theater, the space is usually defined by the proscenium arch; in movies, it is defined by the frame that encloses the images. Cinematic mise-en-scène encompasses both the staging of the action and the way it is photographed.



Figure 22. 'Landscape as Setting': the Scott Street Bridge and dam on a spring evening.

Landscape as SUBJECT	The theme is often about the human-environment relationship; the limitations that landscape places on us, the human transformations on the landscape, and the cultures people have developed by interacting with the landscape. Documentaries traditions portray this extensively.
Landscape as SETTING	Using a theatrical metaphor, the landscape is scenery, the background in which events are staged.
Landscape as CHARACTER	We anthropomorphize landscapes and endow them with human qualities and characteristics.
Landscape as SYMBOL	The landscape image represents something beyond what is physical reality.

Table 3. Films rely heavily on landscapes and its inherent 'meanings' to construct a narrative (Adapted from Helphand 1986, p. 1-8)

FILM PRODUCTION	LANDSCAPE DESIGN
Narrator/Director/Writer/Artist	Designer/Planner/Artist.
Landscape as Setting, Symbol, Subject, Character	Landscape as narrative.
Footage Collection	Data collection, inventory.
Footage Editing - Cut, Slice, Overlay, Repeat, Subtract	Synthesize data, orthogonal drawings, models, all boolean logic.
Movie	Site Design.
Film Techniques - Audio/Lighting/Visual effects/Camera	Design process - orthogonal/notational/transect/abstract
Parallel montage	Directed circulation through two different spaces within a unified space.
Camera close up shot	Artifacts, detailed stone with text engravings, kiosk, interactive materials, play structures, elements that draw users of a space to onto itself.
Camera Medium Shot - Torso to head Shot	Framing and concealing the lower body using planting materials.
Camera Long Shot - Full Body Shot	Open space and personal space issues, when an individual enters a tight space, tight space becomes personal space.
Camera Extreme Long Shot	A planner's view from the sky, god-like, shows regional patterns, detect trends.
Camera Shot - High angle	Looking from above, sense of superiority, sense of verticality, afford expansive view looking over yard, sense of ownership.
Camera Shot - Low angle	Child play areas, constructed at low areas, construct high walls for subliminal quality.
Camera Extreme Long Shot	A planner's view from the sky, god-like, shows regional patterns, detect trends.
Camera Subjective Shot	User point of view, subjective, in control of actions, witnessing action acted onto self.
Camera Third Person Shot	Voyeuristic, people watching.
Two/Three Shot - Two/Three Person dialogue alternating shots	Sharp abrupt changes between spaces, no transitional space between rural and urban, inside and outside, can be linear or random movement between different spaces in a short time.
Lighting - natural light	Open space, outdoor, high visibility, natural colors.
Lighting - ambient light	Consideration of all available lighting, compensate as needed, defensible space.
Lighting - shadow/the unknown/ secrecy	Temporal quality of site, passive solar design, planting design, plant moisture.
Lighting - color coding/mood/signifier	Cultural based values, choice of materials and textures, material palette, planting palette.
Characters - objects/narrator/carry narrative/interactivity	Objects, sculptures, follies, planting, mood-fun-dirty-wet-dry, interactivity between users and site.
Mise-en-scène	Circulation study, what are the characteristics of framing a view to deter from vehicular distraction? Movement of elements/characters within shot, or shot composition. Still shot of a house, vehicle pulls in from left side of frame.

Table 4. An example of how film techniques and processes are transferable into spatial design.

This combination of active sequencing and visual arrangement adds another dimension to moving imagery: time. Temporality in landscape designs can be explored thoroughly with time-altering devices pervasive in film linguistics (Table 5).

The aural dimension in film production is as equally articulated as the imagery itself. Before image and sound integration on film, narratives on the silver-screen were accompanied by a written music score played on live musical instruments. Sound design is essentially a practice in spatial configuration (Table 6). You orchestrate a beat to create rhythm like a boulevard lined with ash trees; you add reverb and echo to simulate a large room or conjure a dreamscape, much like an open field surrounded by city blocks; you pan sound from left to right to connote movement, much like a series of tall topiary walls that reveal and conceal.

The study of acoustics or simply, the act of hearing, is widely practiced in architectural design but less so in landscape design. Though several landscape interventions that instigate acoustic properties have surfaced in the last decade. In collaboration with renowned cellist, Yo-Yo Ma, Julie Messervy designed The Toronto Music Garden. It was inspired by Johann Sebastian Bach's *Suites for Unaccompanied Cello* (McMahon 1998). Douglas Hollis' Sound Garden in Seattle, Washington epitomizes the 'metallic' orchestra in the landscape (Bogle 1995).

Film and design theory share similar thematic ideals. Urban design in particular, have seen a fair share of critical inquiry within the cinematographic contexts. Baudrillard (qtd. in Clarke 1997, p. 1) notes, "The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards towards the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards towards the city." The film noir genre manages to capture Baudrillard's city in the guises of critical urban studies.



Figure 23. 'Landscape as Symbol': the fragmented riverwalk created personalized spaces where the city's refuse congregate.

FILM EDITING TECHNIQUE	TIME-ALTERING SEQUENCE	SPATIAL INTERVENTION
Jump cut or Cross cut	Panning from the street level below looking up at the Principal Building, we jump-cut to an interview in the building.	Create a threshold with an entrance, or crossing of a path, or a framed viewed in which an individual enters. Two different environments can be separated by a wall or window.
Flashback	We flashback from present day Des Moines to Des Moines in the 1900s through the use of a contemporary picture fading into an old photograph and early folk music.	Placement of follies in the landscape, A contemporary object is located next to a Victorian statue.
Flash-forward	The 'Des Moines Exit Ahead' sign postulates my future destination on a drive.	A billboard, signage, or a kiosk voicing what experience is ahead on a trail.
Flash-between	Insertion of filmed interviews between a scenic drive signifies a memory or recollection.	A series of gardens that signify a piece of music. Movements between music these spaces can be non-linear.
Fade	Create gradual transition between a pastoral landscape to an urban environment	Manipulating vertical elements to mediate the transition between one environment to another.
Freeze-frame	The empty benches in front of City Hall is a metonymy for misplanning.	A landscape that is frozen in time like most historical landscapes.
Slow motion	Water lapping a concrete walk was slowed down to bear witness to a natural process.	Careful selection of ever-blooming plants and the development of new hybrids that bloom later than earlier may create the sense of a spring in slow motion.
Fast motion	Time-lapse of a sunset connotes the passage of time.	An ecological restoration project simulates the different stages of natural succession through different landscapes.

Table 5. Time-altering devices found in film and transmitted onto landscape interventions (Adapted from Potteiger and Purinton 1998, p. 113).

AUDIO CONCEPTS/ EFFECTS	SOUND EDITING/MIXING INTERVENTION	SPATIAL INTERVENTION
Analog vs. Digital Sound	Analog refers to sound signals transmitted into what you actually hear as opposed to digital sound that highly mechanized, lacking the range of natural analog sounds to some degree due to digital processing and compression.	The composition of audio stimulus in the landscape, experience could be dominated by natural outdoor sounds, i.e. stream trickling or a mechanized electric generating windmill that produces an electric hum.
Dynamic Range	A measure of the span between the quietest and the loudest sounds.	Manipulate the range of audible sounds in the landscape through planting schemes or architectural forms. An enclosed space within an open field.
Depth	Distance of audio stimulus to listener.	Establishes a foreground, middleground and background scheme of visual and audio experiences.
Tracks	Number of individual sound elements used in a mix.	A series of paths representing different visual and aural stimulus.
Sampling	Using bits of sounds from different sources to construct a new composition.	A single path or walking experience that crosses different thresholds and environments, i.e.. rural to city then suburb.
Normalize	To control the maximum level or magnitude of a sound.	A formal design scheme that conforms all vertical elements to a specific height.
Staccato vs. Legato	When notes are played short and detached as opposed to smooth and long connected notes.	A landscape with clearly marked spaces by planting types or surface material as opposed to a seamless landscape surface with or without transitions.

Table 6. Sound editing is an art form in itself. In learning new ways of hearing, we also discover new ways of seeing.

Deutsche (1996, p. 249) discusses urban theorist Mike Davis's critic of Roman Polanski's (1974) *Chinatown*:

Associating his own alternative history of L.A. with noir fictions, Davis seems to define urban theory as a discourse that not only analyzes representations of the city but, like noir, produces images of the city. Such a reading of urban scholarship as culture, not 'social science', is a welcome departure from the field's traditional configuration of interdisciplinary space. Acknowledging the permeability of boundaries between disciplines, it promise to bring the insights of urban political economy into the arena of cultural studies while dislodging political economy from privileged position as the ontological basis of all spatial politics.

All motion pictures have one similarity, they tell stories. Be it an abstract Mary Lucier (Tschinkel 1990) video installation or an ethnographic study by Robert Flaherty (1922), we work within a narrative construct to propel the movement of imagery and sound. The conventional practice involved in constructing the film narrative is usually preceded by a script and a storyboard. A script or screenplay is the written narrative describing scenes, dialogs and settings. The storyboard would be a visual equivalent of the script. It is a visualization exercise where *shots* are planned in advanced by sketching the sequence and outlining a designer's *mise-en-scène*.



Figure 24. The lack of excessive filming equipment made the filming process less obtrusive to the local resident community.

Given the nature of *Looking Closer*, conventional film-making paradigms were abandoned in favor of a free-form exploratory approach. The footage and data collection process were not premeditated or scripted. They were no initial storyboards or screenplays written to compose the shooting process either. Raw footages was collected as the downtown river reveals itself through the lenses of the camera and the eyes and minds of the local residents.

The film 'designer' analyzes the raw footage and filters it to draw meaning and significance before any film 'design' decisions were made. Using the cinematographic language and its spatial equivalents discussed above, these filtered footages were synthesized to produce a landscape film.

The Downtown Des Moines River became an open canvas painted by visual narratives from the first person's perspective. The film product is a visual intervention in which the audience is engaged in a reflective exercise and the production of the film itself, a practice in recovering a forgotten landscape.



Figure 25. Tracing the river, a series of four shots combining a long-shot, an extra long-shot and two subjective shots suggesting the switch from a viewer's gaze to the walker's gaze on the riverwalk.

GLACIERS, MOUNDS & MONKS

To write history without putting any water in it is to leave out a large part of the story. Human experience has not been so dry as that.

Donald Worster
Rivers of Empire

John Zeller is a local historian at the State Historical Society of Iowa. He grew up in Des Moines and had lived most of his life there as well. Despite his length of residency, his true interest in the river began some time ago when he was asked to present an hour lecture on Des Moines' early history. That presentation led to a decade old affair with the downtown river.

Having read over a hundred years worth of newspapers in microfilm, he had compiled notes of each article that pertained to the downtown river. Undoubtedly, John was the authority on the Downtown Des Moines River. "If there is anything that is continuous in this city, is that we have the river and we will probably continue to always have the river through the city. I guess the river will be the most permanent feature the city has ever had," he remarked.

Throughout history, civilizations of the world have been utilizing freshwater navigable waters - lakes and rivers. Intracoastal systems transcended Boston, Massachusetts to Key West, Florida while floating markets flourished on the Chao Praya River in Thailand. These water trails represent living ecosystems, cultural exchange venues, trading points, recreational corridors, and exploration routes. River confluences in particular share attributes that encouraged settlements over time.



Figure 26. The Laotian man was on this very slope everyday like clockwork. He said the Des Moines River reminded him of the Mekong River, only smaller in stature, with "less jungles".

In Iowa, the Des Moines River is perhaps the most significant water trail on par with the Mississippi and the Missouri River. Recently designated as the longest water trail in Iowa, the Des Moines River Water Trail stretches 404 miles from Estherville in Emmet County to Keokuk in Lee County southeast of Iowa respectively. An eloquent description by Ilda Hammer (1947, p. 33) revealed a unique association between the different origins of the name “Des Moines” and her river that runs within:

Some say that “Moines” means “mounds”, and refers to a series of mounds, some at the mouth of the river and others near Raccoon Fork. Others declare it means “the middle,” and refers to the Des Moines River as the largest waterway between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Another story is that about 1700 some French monks had come as missionaries to Indians settled near the mouth of the river. Before this time the name “Moingona” had been shortened by French explorers to “Moin” for convenience. It is thought this was later changed to “Moines,” the French word for “monks.” In time the river became associated with the monks and was called “la Rivere des Moines,” or the river of the monks.

The present Des Moines River was shaped as the Wisconsin glacier began retreating about 13,000 years ago. At a regional scale, this geological event formed the Des Moines Lobe, a fertile landform named after the city in which the glaciers recession stopped. This fertile landform also gave Iowa its agrarian legacy. The river flow remained unimpeded throughout prehistoric periods creating massive valleys in the process. In talking to a geologist friend of his, John discovered a remarkable story:

The river valley extends from the Capitol Building to Terrace Hill which is about a mile- -and-a-half wide in the center of Des Moines. Those were the banks of the river after the glaciers. Downtown Des Moines was the bed of an ancient river which was seventy feet deep and a mile-and-a-half wide which would make the present Mississippi look small. Of course the Mississippi back then would be colossal as well. It is just a staggering thought how large this river was when the glaciers were melting.

The first significant human intervention on the Des Moines River occurred when the confluence between the Des Moines and the Raccoon River was moved further downstream to accommodate a dock, and other military amenities between 1843 and 1846. These constructions marked the humble beginnings of the city of Des Moines.



Figure 27. Close up on the moving of the Raccoon River (Zeller 2003b).



Figure 28. Birth place of Des Moines on the confluence of the Raccoon and Des Moines Rivers (ISUGIS Facility 2003).

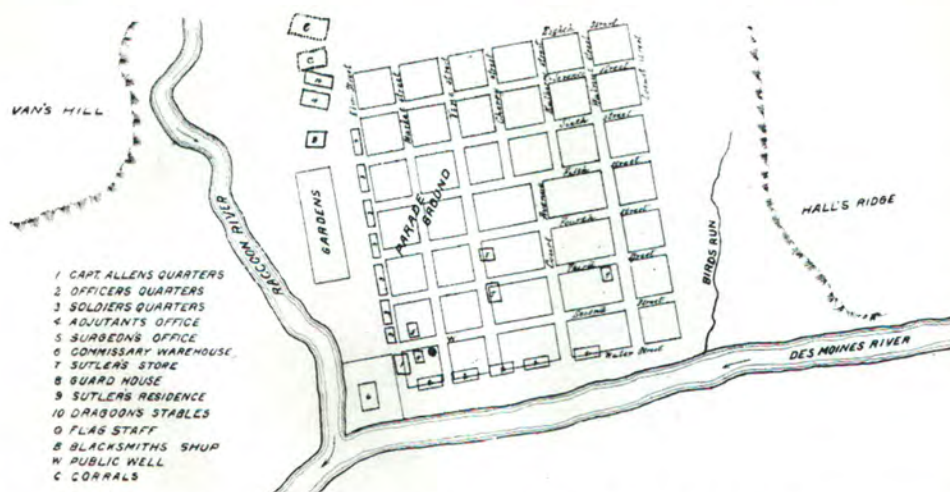


Figure 29. Des Moines first plat responded to the rivers' meander. This pattern is similar to most towns in the Midwest (Hussey 1919, p. 8).

DOWNTOWN

*When you're alone
And life is making you lonely,
You can always go downtown
When you've got worries,
All the noise and the hurry
Seems to help, I know, downtown*

*Just listen to the music of the traffic in the city
Linger on the sidewalk where the neon signs are pretty
How can you lose?*

*The lights are much brighter there
You can forget all your troubles, forget all your cares and go
Downtown, things'll be great when you're
Downtown, no finer place for sure,
Downtown, everything's waiting for you*

Petula Clark
Downtown



Figure 30 Postcards from the past, circa 1920s (Zeller 2003b).

“From cabin to capital,” as Leroy Pratt (1971, p. iii) described, personified Des Moines as a city that constantly evolves and reinvents itself every so often. Between the 1900s to the early 1930s, claims for healthier environments to ‘civilize’ society prompted more improvements to be imposed on the downtown river’s natural surge. At the height of the City Beautiful Movement, a Civic Center furnished the riverfront with Beaux Arts structures. The Municipal Building, like most of its counterparts, had lustrous concrete walks decorated with grand platforms, flower beds, and steps leading to the river’s edge. The Public Library; however, stood out with its salmon pink Kettle River limestone façades. With a grand entrance flaunting a fountain and curving steps to boot, the library remained undaunted by its pale white neighbors. Similarly, the downtown the Des Moines River received a grooming treatment. Billboards, trash and wood pilings were removed while concrete walls and balustrades framed the river’s meander. The downtown river has gained its rightful place among the classical civic buildings built around it.

Des Moines’ major intervention coming out of the 1990s brought a fresh vision: the *Vision Plan*. The *Vision Plan* spoke of a non-linear approach towards urban planning (Agrest and Gandelsonas 1992). Des Moines was to be ‘read as a series of lines in grids, junctures, voids, wedges and above all, *moments* that would transpire as architectural *point interventions* using specific geographical, historical and cultural features of the city as a guide for future growth (Agrest and

Gandelsonas 1992, p. 1-2). Much emphasis was given on “visual culture, formal planning and visual aesthetic character of the ‘American City’” (Agrest and Gandelsonas 1992, p. 1).

Perhaps reducing such themes into forms, lines and visual character provides a clear and definitive framework to address what and how the ‘American City’ should look like. Such themes; however, are far from definitive or simplistic for public scrutiny. Geographical, historical, and cultural entities are dynamic, yet subtle. More often than not, these elements transpire on a landscape unseen to the untrained eye and subverted under the muddy waters of the river city. Despite the holistic non-linear approach of the Vision Plan, Downtown Des Moines had not prevented the gradual deterioration of its most vital commodity: residents.

Today, downtown Des Moines is sedentary and void of commotion. From above, the cityscape is dotted by parking lots and warehouses. Residential quarters are scattered throughout downtown with no coherent neighborhood in sight. Driving on a weekday along Grand

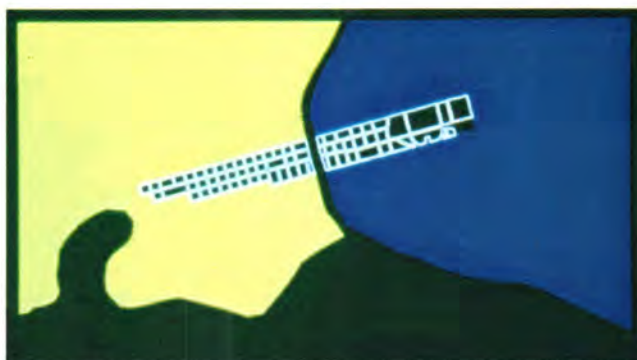


Figure 31

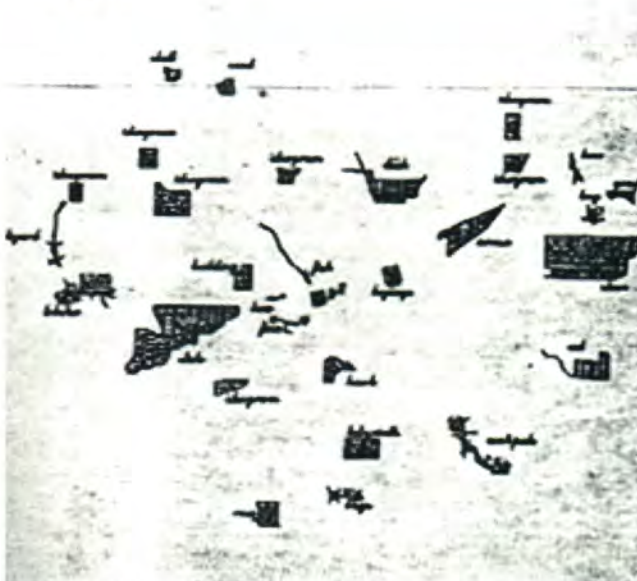


Figure 32

Existing Conditions Survey

Relocation Options

Plan A shows three existing buildings with potential for housing alternatives to accommodate relocation needs for residents within the Project core.

1.	100-110 SW 8th Street	sq. ft.
2.	22 SW 9th Street	sq. ft.
3.	1001 Cherry Street	sq. ft.

Preliminary Relocation Needs

Building	Units
1. 501 12th Street - Apartment	6
2. 1411 Locust - Hanwood Building	50
3. 1431 Locust - Apartments	6
4. 1310 Grand - Clifton Apartments	20
5. 1301 Locust - Arlington Apartments	56
6. 1200 Grand - Kingston Building	30

TOTAL UNITS 168

Note: Not included in the residential relocation needs is 1006 Grand - Door of Faith Mission, which averages 70 occupied beds per night, and 1729 Grand, 1519 Grand, and 510 15th Street which preliminarily are not considered for relocation.

Plan B shows existing buildings with potential to accommodate small business relocation needs.

1.	306 15th Street
2.	1440 Walnut Street
3.	1321 Walnut Street
4.	1320-1326 Walnut Street
5.	1101 Walnut Street
6.	1100 Walnut Street
7.	1020-1024 Walnut Street
8.	200 10th Street
9.	902-910 Walnut Street
10.	906 Walnut Street
11.	112 Walnut Street
12.	116 Walnut Street
13.	120 10th Street
14.	404 10th Street - Masonic Temple

Figure 33

Figure 31. Gandelsonas' urban reading analyzed where the major urban processes took place in Des Moines (Agrest and Gandelsonas 1992, p. 10).

Figure 32. Topographic Constellation Study #3. (Agrest and Gandelsonas 1992, p. 12).

Figure 33. Gandelsonas proposed the relocation of local businesses and residential areas in favor of architectural moments (Des Moines Gateway Project 1994, p. 12).

Avenue or Locust Street prompts one to conclude that the downtown street life has disappeared. With the exception of the daily traffic rushes and lunch hours, the streets are dead for most of the day. Twenty feet above, there was another human conduit. Temperature and integrity controlled, the skywalks were buzzing with activity. It had foodcourts and wide windows overlooking the streets below. They were meticulously plan to connect prominent offices and parking garages to expedite human traffic between them. How does a concrete sidewalk compete with three miles of plush carpets? Back on the ground plane, the rest of downtown becomes a transition zone between automobiles and their destinations.

As nightfall approaches, the city enters a calmed and subdued state. The eerie silence is broken occasionally by the crashing water over the dam and vehicles that traverse the bridges. With the bridges and the amphitheater brightly lit, it is a sight of splendor and exuberance. Yet there is barely a human soul in sight to enjoy it. In some nights, one might notice a silhouette or two pacing under the bridges. Likewise, these blurred figures will never bear witness to your presence nor would they reveal so much as an inkling of their pursuits.



Figure 34. Voids, parking lot with no cars, skywalks with no walk, pedestrian mall with no pedestrians and a river bathed in splendor with no show.

DES MOINES QUICK FACTS

POPULATION	1990	2000
Des Moines	193,187	196,682
Downtown	4190	4204
Working Population Downtown		65,000

LARGEST EMPLOYERS

Principal Financial Group	9,628
State of Iowa	7,500
Central Iowa Health System	5,000

Parking spaces = 30,000

Blocks connected by skywalks = 28

Miles of skywalks = 2.8

City of Des Moines
Action Center
Demographics 2003



Figure 35. Downtown Des Moines from the river.

STEAMBOATS AND THE RIVER RAT'S DREAM

A river does not just happen; it has a beginning and end. Its story is written in rich earth, in ice, and in water-carved stone, and its story as the lifeblood of the land is filled with color, music and thunder.

Andy Russell
The Life of a River

Michael R. LaVelle was on top of the world, in Iowa at least. He is the General Manager and Culinary Director of the Embassy Club, located on the 40th floor of the Principal Building. The club was a membership-only restaurant. Given his interest in turn-of-century paddleboats, my endeavor piqued his interest.

He was born in Boone, Iowa, where the Boone River originates empties into the Des Moines River at Stanhope in Hancock County, an hour north of Des Moines. As a young boy, he described himself as a river rat. "Not in a bad sort of way I hope," he smirked. Being an owner of a paddleboat himself, Michael dreamed of the return of boats on the Des Moines River:

The Des Moines River is actually considered by the Coast Guard a navigable waterway and it still is. The river has many challenges now. In the old days it was the main mode of commerce in Des Moines. It was the way in which Des Moines obtained its trade goods before there was a railroad, before there were roads. I think that the interesting thing to do with the river is to dream a little bit about what it could become, and as you have that dream, you would realize that what you are talking is to go back to what it was. The improvements to be made on the Des Moines River is to return it to the state that it was a hundred years ago which through our efforts, we have diminished in terms of navigation and the quality of life that once was.

In 1931, pioneer school teacher Tacitus Hussey (1919, p. 109) described a thriving riverfront and on it, the rare arrival of the steamboat:

So, when a steamboat whistle was heard at or about "Rattlesnake Bend" all business at the "Fort" was suspended and a sudden desire would be evinced to be at landing without any further invitation; and if there were any of the inhabitants missing it was because of the absence from the village or sickness.

Downtown Des Moines was shaped mainly by transportation forces. While stagecoaches were prominent in the 1850s, they were relatively few fordable routes across the Des Moines River to access established towns. Steamboats had a brief moment under the spotlight. Heusinkveld (1989, p. 42) explains, "The steamboat had been a dream ever since the Des Moines River Navigation Plan to make the river navigable for boats had been approved by Congress in 1846. The plan ultimately failed due to mismanagement and corruption."

The steamers' longevity was also circumvented by expanding railroads from the east. Dahl (1978, p. 39) noted, "The festive celebrations which marked the arrival of the river steamer would give way to the predictable dependability of the iron horse."

During Des Moines' semi-centennial, a 'land' and 'water' parade took place to celebrate Des Moines transportation significance. From Lock 19 at Keokuk in southeast Iowa to the downtown Des Moines' Center St. Dam, the Des Moines River has been straightened, walled, paved, or locked. It was a water trail that could be controlled, narrowed, and bridged in the name of community spirit, transportation, and aesthetics. Interestingly enough, the dams in downtown Des Moines were not built to mitigate the river per se but rather to create a lake effect with deeper pools for boating. Quaint miniature sandbar islands with hanging black willows were later removed for steamboat navigation. The river was no doubt celebrated for its recreational and distribution properties.

Architects, Agrest and Gandelonas' (1992) urban reading of Des Moines explored how the city pushed to reshape its original plat. Like most early Midwestern towns, the direction of their plats usually corresponded to the river. In Des Moines, the first city plat ran northeast and southwest following the river's meander. By comparing plats that follow the river to plats that follow a true-north grid, one could surmise where a town began.

Today, the city continues to rectify the 'mistake' of its pioneers. It seems inevitable that the future face of Downtown Des Moines will continue to reflect transportation agendas.

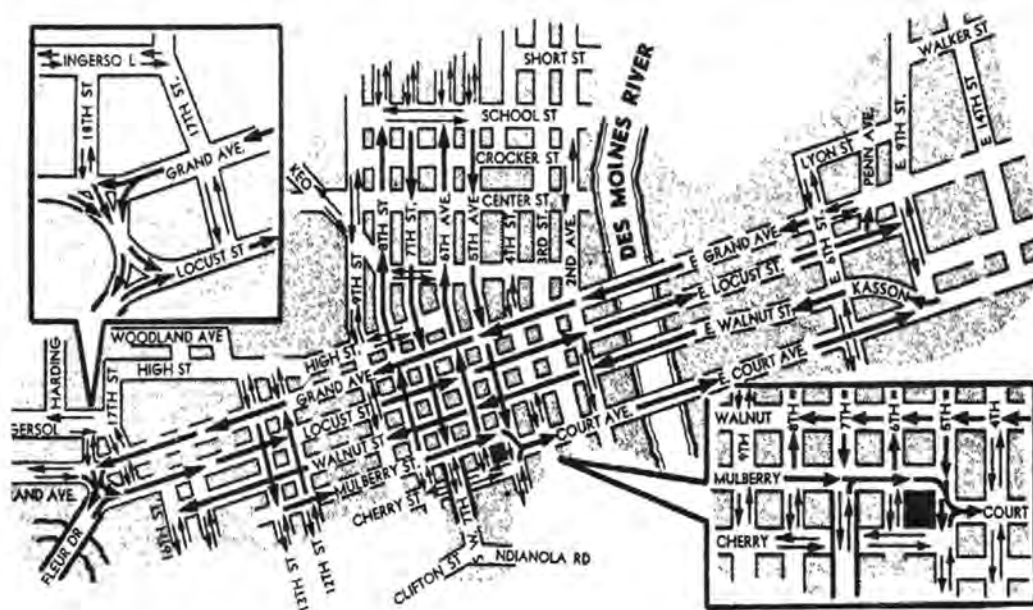


Figure 36. The City of Des Moines' rectifies the 'river' plat to fit a true-north plat (Dahl 1978, p. 140).



Figure 37. Steamboats reached Des Moines occasionally in the 1850s but the dream was short lived with the onset of the iron horse: the locomotive (Dahl 1978, p. 39).

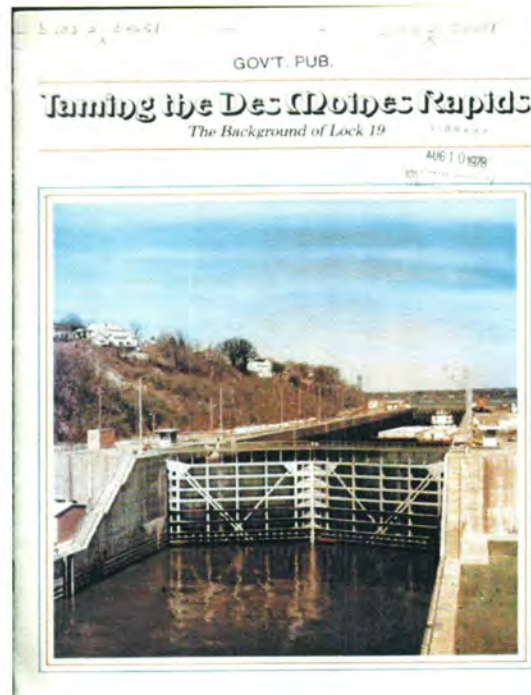


Figure 38. The US Army Corp. of Engineers first major intervention on Iowa's rivers began in 1866 (Tweet 1978).

Figure 39. The Daisy Mae made headlines after years of minimal paddle boat navigation on the Des Moines River (Zeller 2003b).

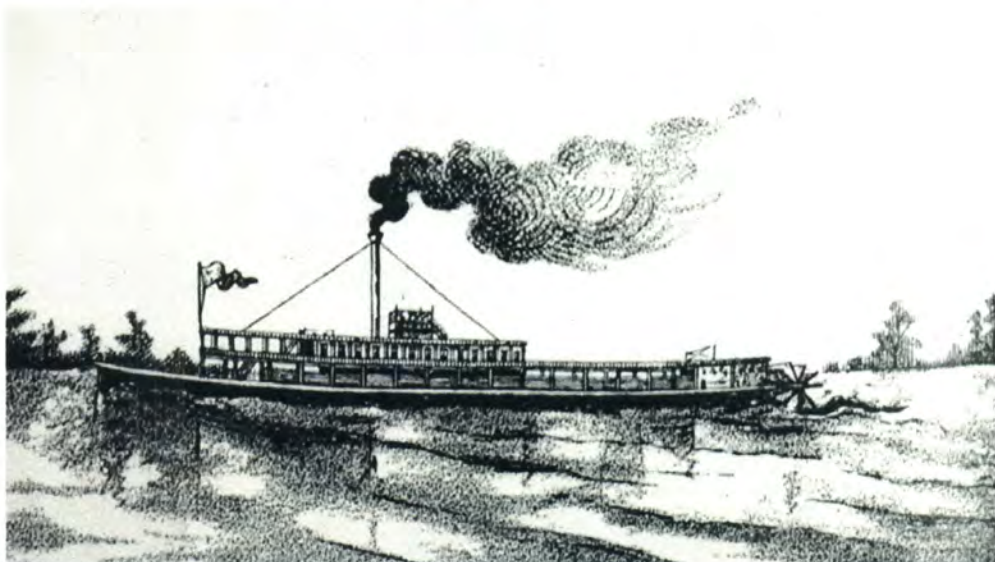


Figure 40. A typical Class II steamboat on the early Des Moines River (Zeller 2003b).

WHERE IS THE RIVER? THE TWO RIVERS ART EXPO

To the lost man, to the pioneer penetrating a new country, to the naturalist who wishes to see the wild land at its wildest, the advice is always the same -- follow a river. The river is the original forest highway. It is nature's own Wilderness Road.

Edwin Way Teale



Figure 41. The poster for the Two Rivers Art Expo said it all, a convergence of two waves that gave rise to Des Moines

In looking for events that celebrated the downtown river, I found a particularly short list. There was the Des Moines Art Festival, a major event that placed Des Moines on the map. It was recently ranked the fifth-best Fine Arts Festival in the nation by the 2003 ArtFair SourceBook. Since the unveiling of the Simon Estes Riverfront Amphitheater, *Nitefall on the River* became a popular affair held annually every summer at the amphitheater. In their 17th year, the Two Rivers Art Expo is an annual arts festival organized by the local Metro Arts Alliance. It was quite revering to find events in Des Moines that identified with biological entities which gave rise to the city. Yet I found it peculiar when I read the press release for the Two River's Art Expo (Metro Arts Alliance of Greater Des Moines 2003):

Clear your calendar. Call your friends. Bring the family. Metro Arts Alliance proudly presents the 17th Annual Two Rivers Art Expo, the must.have.art expo, November 6th and 7th at the Varied Industries Building at the Iowa State Fairgrounds.

The event was held at the Iowa Fair Grounds, miles away from any rivers no doubt. Perhaps the late Iowa fall weather does not accommodate an outdoor event. Nonetheless, I took the trip and ventured to the art expo with no pretensions.

As I wandered around the many stations at the expo, I found myself staring at a large colored print of lily pads on river. It looked so real I could almost touch it. A shrieking child got me out of that trance.

I later met with a local artist for an interview. Robin Paul, a local artist and an insurance executive, was displaying her stained-glass designs on a white clothed table. “Do you ever go down to the Downtown Des Moines River for an evening stroll perhaps?” I asked. “No I don’t. The only time I went down to the river is during summer for the art festival and music,” she replied. She adds, “For me it has to be a destination, downtown to me is not a destination. It would be a pass-through area.”

Brandy grew up in Ankeny but she spent much of her life going to school in Des Moines. She could vividly recall her school bus driving over the Des Moines bridges every weekday. “I don’t even know where you would go really. I didn’t know they had walks down by the river. We just didn’t think about it. The river wasn’t much of an issue, we just go over it,” she exclaimed.

“What might have kept me from going to the river?” David deliberated. I met David Dahlquist at his studio adjacent to the new Martin Luther King Parkway. Trained in landscape architecture, David practices his design skills through sculpture and land art.

I suppose it involves programming. There weren’t things programmed on that part of the city. I would come down years ago where there was a huge festival called the Carp Festival by the bridges but even back then, I don’t think the people paid much attention to the river.



Figure 42. A woman paddles her tricycle effortlessly over Grand Avenue Bridge.

David's clarification was a little contradictory. There have always been programmed events on the river since the 1900s but of late, festivals held at the Downtown Des Moines River in its namesake seemed a little contrived.

One could argue that the river remains as a celebrated entity when the public converges for annual festivals and live music performances. Yet each exodus after a programmed event would always silence any enchantment the river aspires to be. On any given day, the neatly trimmed lawns along the riverfront bear no trace of heightened affairs.

It seems that the grand vision that began in the early 1900s to transform the riverfront into an archetype of governance and public amenity had failed to sustain the public's interest over time. John described, "While supervised bathing houses and indoor pools reduced the number of drowning incidents on the river, it also reduced the magnitude of patrons to the downtown. Recurring major floods further tarnished the river's image as a safe leisure ground. Acquisition of land for new parks along the river in a sense directed people away from the downtown river to the north. As suburbs grew, malls were introduced, replacing the river as the place to be and be seen."



Figure 43. Waterstains have been imprinted on all the bridge foundations on the downtown river. They signify past flood events that ravaged the city over the past hundred years.



Figure 44. In 1915, the first semblance of an amusement park, came to Des Moines. Riverview Park combined rollercoaster rides and swimming facilities. Ingersoll Park was a precedent but it was demolished soon after to fulfill housing demands (Zeller 2003b).



Figure 45. The flood of 1903 is one of many floods that devastated Des Moines since its infancy (Zeller 2003b).



Figure 46. Housing 30 shops, 4000 parking spaces, and a thirty-six-lane subterranean bowling alley, shoppers flocked to the new Merle Hay Mall in 1959 (Zeller 2003b).

Do we live by way of only seeking destinations? Do we traverse from one location to another leaving the unseen and unknown at the periphery. Have we bounded the landscape experience into mediated Disneyland visits and spring break excursions. Have we ceased to stop and smell the roses?

In our excessive driving routines along roads built on construction standards, our experience of the ordinary landscape is homogenized and standardized by the size of the road and our windshield. The relationship between highway design and the automobile industry reflects that notion. As cars get bigger, so do the windshields and our field of vision on the road. Yet highway standards compensates for this growth by expanding the size of the roads. As a result, or expanded visual experience is balanced and normalized. We don't really see more. The visual experience framed by the windshield remains the same.

I decided to experience the river first hand. With a borrowed canoe, I managed get on the river, putting in on top the Center Street Dam. It was almost dusk when I set the kayak down on the river. The sun's rays was reflected brilliantly off the water surface. I skirted along the rip-rap on the banks, making sure the current wasn't strong enough to draw me towards the raging dam. For a moment, I felt the river pushing me upstream. The slight breeze can have quite an effect on the lake-like river.

On the water, it seemed surreal. This was the first time I had ever directly engaged the downtown river. The river looked huge initially. In paddling from one bank to another, I realized that it was merely an illusion, the river was actually smaller than what I had anticipated. Capturing footage on the river was eventful. I paddled upriver and floated next a tugboat under the University Ave. Bridge. A towering crane was sitting on a platform right by it, presumably it was navigated in position to assist construction efforts on the bridge itself. I wondered what other interesting milieus I would encounter on these sparkling waters.

Paddling on a river, our cone of vision changes constantly. We use different boats to suit the veracity of different rivers. The river transforms itself every so often by creating sandbars and moving eddies. The meander shifts over time, unnoticeable to the naked eye yet we feel its subtle shift from the constant moving wake under us. On my way home that night, I was brought back to an early memory of mine about Des Moines.

It was a cold night on New Year's Eve in 1996—not a star in sight in the foggy sky. On a Boeing D-C-9-30 from LAX, I reached my new home, Des Moines, Iowa. There were three of us and we heard almost nothing about the city. I knew it was Iowa's capitol. Yet everybody else in the car knew very little. We left Des Moines for Ames the minute we got there. As the capitol pulled away in the rearview mirror, a glimmer of light caught my eye. The light shimmered and waved disappeared and came back again incessantly. There must a river nearby.



Figure 47. The meander of the river is shifting as we speak.



Figure 48. The little tugboat that could.

TRACING THE RIVERWALK

The downtown riverwalk is fragmented. On the east side one could walk inches from the river from the Grand Avenue Bridge to the Locust Street Bridge. We pick up the route at the amphitheater which heads south and terminates at the Scott Street Dam. North of Grand Avenue, the walk goes from the Center Street Dam to the University Avenue Bridge. Looping back on the west side of the river, the concrete walk ends at the Center Street Dam and continues for a limited distance until we hit the Grand Avenue Bridge. There we can find the traces of a crumbled walk. A huge drain flows seamlessly emitting the cities 'cleansed' liquid into the river. After the drain, we can proceed again for an instance until we hit the Locust Street Bridge. Walking up a green slope, we could cross Locust Street and continue our riverwalk all the way aside the Sec Taylor Stadium and around the Raccoon-Des Moines confluence.

"What changes have you seen on the river over the years?" I asked. Forey took a quick glance over the Grand Avenue Bridge and concluded, "The river really hasn't changed much over the years... it's still as dirty as ever!" Forey Jacobson is a school teacher. I met him while I was filming on a cold September morning in 2003. He approached me without hesitation, delivering his sermon about a 'concrete' downtown river that holds no natural charm. Forey was a character indeed.

Sporting a sleeveless shirt and a backpack housing a boombox blasting Irish odes., you could hear him a mile away. He also had an unmistakable stylish 'mullet' for a haircut.

Forey's routine every Sunday morning included a barefoot jog upriver away from downtown. He was a nature lover after all, and nature was ten minutes north of the Center Street Dam along the John Pat Dorrian Trail. Incidentally, I had my own trail to follow that day.

The warm afternoon was much welcomed transition from the chilly morning earlier. I traced the entire riverwalk that day, only to reveal some unsightly attributes on the river. It was dirty and foul. Hot humid conditions created quite a stench along the river that summer. Walking down the riverwalk, I began making note of micro-elements on the landscape. Burned refuse laid close to



Figure 49. Fragmentation on the riverwalk

Figure 50. Micro-elements found along the west side of the Downtown Des Moines Riverwalk.





Figure 51. Micro-elements found along the east side of the Downtown Des Moines Riverwalk.

warn out comforters and blankets alike. A bird lay lifeless on the walk. Other than me, the only detectable movement on the river was a cruising *Miller High Life* beer can.

Items converged and congested within crevices on the fractured concrete walk. Cloaked in a layer of bubbly foam, Styrofoam coke containers and broken twigs formed a nest of sorts. They were layers upon layers of varying textures of trash. How much trash can the river preserve? In looking closer, I found another layer of micro proportions: ladybugs.

Probably the largest population of organisms present in downtown Des Moines at the moment, Asian lady beetles flock to the river like a neighborhood school children to a local playground. They were everywhere. On the bridges they would cling on walls, pipes, and beams. On the water, they build floating communities on detritus and broken logs. They flutter across the river in all directions, yet remaining within the locale. Those were domestic flights. A local entomologist noted (Lewis 2003):

Asian lady beetles (Harmonia axyridis), like other accidental invaders, are "outdoor" insects that create a nuisance by wandering indoors during a limited portion of their life cycle. They do not feed or reproduce indoors; they cannot attack the house structure, furniture, or fabrics. They cannot sting or carry diseases. Lady beetles do not feed on people though they infrequently pinch exposed skin. Lady beetles may leave a slimy smear and they have a distinct odor when squashed.

Fortunately, they were no patrons at the downtown river for the ladybugs to be much of a nuisance to. When the ladybugs are left to their own devices, they have other more important issues to content with.

I tracked a small group of ladybugs under the Locust Street Bridge for about a year. They congregated around a rusted steel rivet next to a crumbled section of the riverwalk. Despite their short life cycle, they persisted all the way until late October. From early spring to late fall, they remained fearless of the changing seasons. Higher up on the food-chain, the spiders had also made the riverfront their home.

Nocturnal in nature, their presence in the day can only be detected by their shiny reflective webs. Lined like modular homes, there were countless amounts of spun webs on the bridges, beams and balustrades. Weightlessly flowing with the wind, these minute works of art were dazzling yet appalling in appearance. I read the bug-speckled web like a seafood menu, wondering which ones were fresh or stale.

As the sun set, the homemakers returned for their supper. They were out in full flesh. In every nook and cranny, they wriggle around their nets unnoticed, sheltered from the bright moon. With the river's shimmering surface, they danced with every gust of the wind. It was a sight to behold.



Figure 52. Resilient and self-sufficient, the ladybugs were the largest population in Downtown Des Moines.

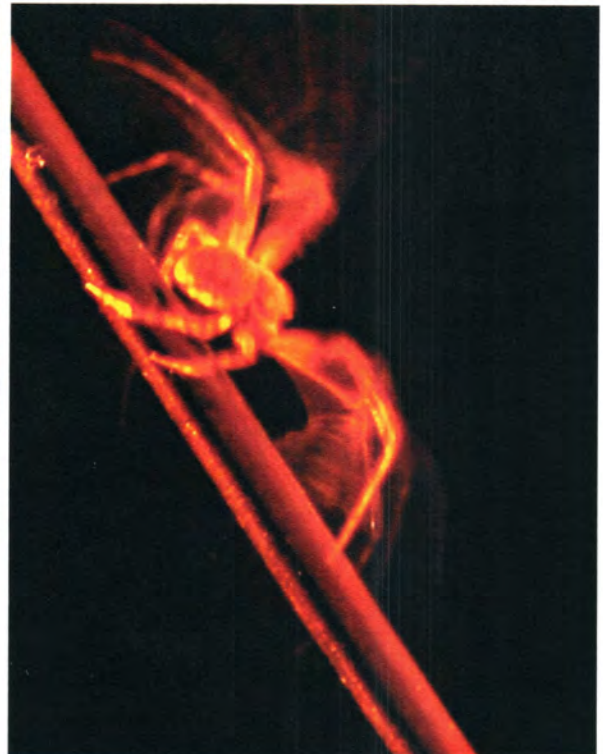


Figure 53. Preying on the masses, the spiders only come out to feed at night.

The river was alive after all. Down at Scott's Street Dam, swarms of Bonaparte's gulls took advantage of the low river like most local anglers would. Fish released in Saylorville Dam, about fifteen miles northeast of here, would eventually find their way downtown through a series of locks and dams.

Annually, the river would repel our efforts to confine it. Sandy beaches would grace the Simon Estes Riverfront Amphitheater unsuspected every summer. For a short lifespan, wild weeds would grow on the small microcosm of the sand bar. This exotic scene will last, albeit for a brief moment.



Figure 54. The Downtown Des Moines River continues to exude its natural charm. The summer of 2003 saw record bikes laying by the river's beaches.

HEADLINES: BRIDGES, MONSTERS & OPERA HOUSES

The face of the river, in time, became a wonderful book... which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it had uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day.

Mark Twain
Life on the Mississippi

“Draw or sketch a place on the Downtown Des Moines River. It may be real or imagined,” I requested. Ralph began sketching without hesitation. Ralph Christian is a local historian with a different affinity to the river. He documents historic structures along the river for the State Historical Society of Iowa. Ralph drew a familiar image. It was a doll-like drawing shaped like a tall house with ‘Des Moines Opera House’ inscribed on top. “There used to be several opera houses at one point in Des Moines. Des Moines was a major stopping point for regional acts.” Ralph explained. It was certain that Ralph’s nostalgia stems from a city image that began in the height of the City Beautiful movement where white concrete monuments lined the downtown river and its banks.

Among the monuments that played a major role in Des Moines history were the string of bridges that spans seven blocks between University Avenue and Scott Street. The downtown bridges are synecdoches for the political relationship between Polk County and Des Moines. John Zeller recalled his favorite river story:

The story about how the river bridges got paid for. In 1869, all the wooden bridges fell down in the big floods and they had no other way to cross the river but by a riverboat so between 1870 and 1871 the city would sell bridge bonds to build sturdy iron bridges with foundations made of stone. These were very expensive and they became toll bridges. The city never paid off as much as the interest on those bonds over the years. There was such faith in the growth of the city that eventually, the number of people living in Des Moines would exceed the number of people in the rest of the county.

When that scenario came to fruition, the city would vote for the county to absorb the debt for the bridges. This situation panned out in the public arena and the press without much secrecy. In a way this speaks of Prairie Meadows and the Iowa Events Center today. It’s just a beautiful example of the politics at that time and evidently today as well.

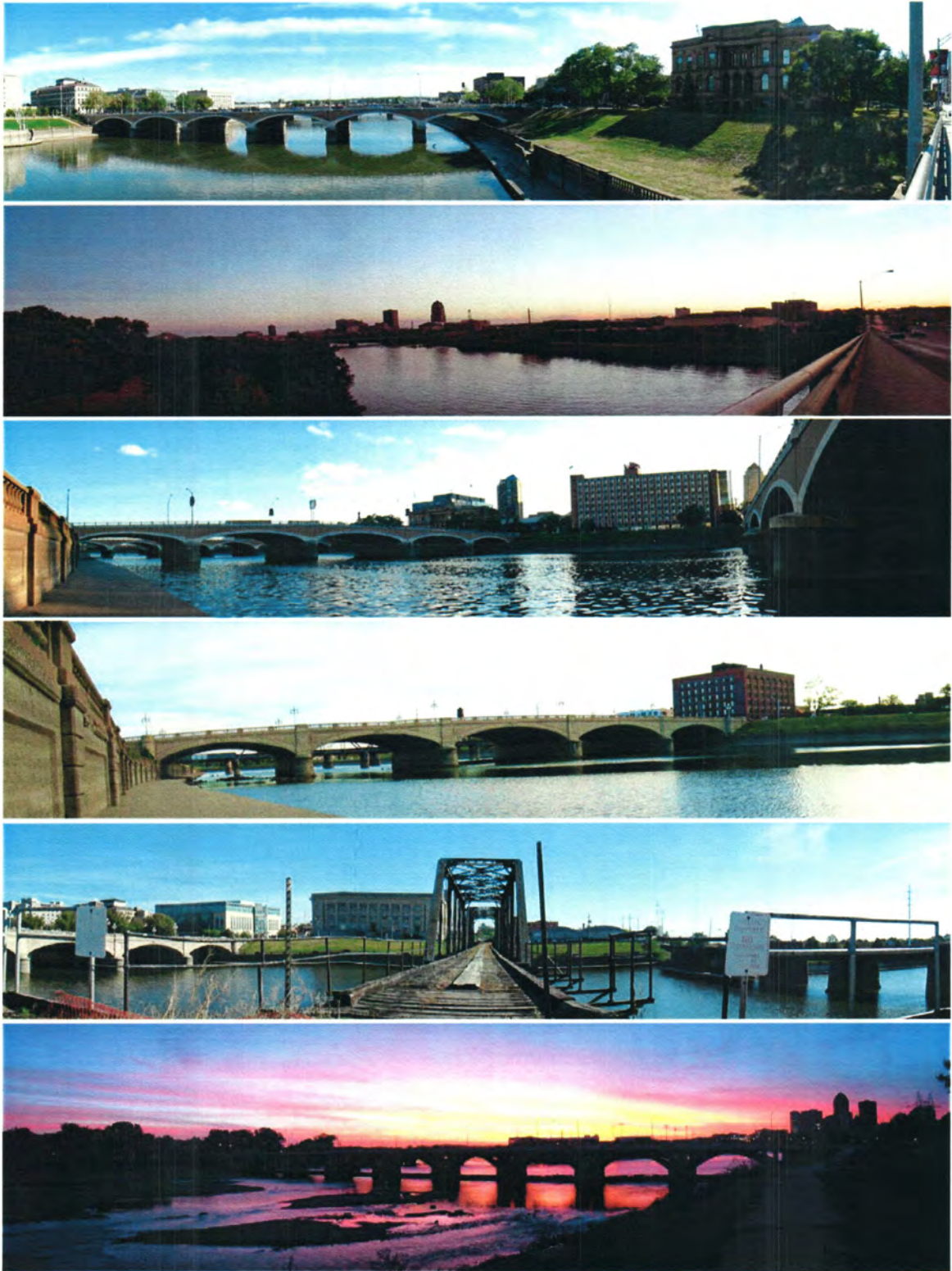


Figure 55. (Top to bottom) Looking at Walnut St. Bridge; overlooking the University Ave. Bridge; between Locust St. and Grand Ave. Bridge on the riverwalk; Court Ave. Bridge from the riverwalk; Court Ave. Railroad Bridge; and the Scott's St. Bridge.

Aside from political maneuverings, biological entities in the downtown river have also made headlines in Des Moines. It was reported in a local publication, PointBlank (Gaskell 2003), that a webbed-feet monster referred to as *Dessi*, was to blame for several homeless deaths in 2002.

Jon Gaskell (2003) found a witness' description:

Its bulbous and misshapen head seemed almost to hang from the end of a short, thick neck projecting from a squat body. Its face was similar to those of the giant catfish known to cower and feed off the bottom of the river. But its body was easily seven feet long and perched upon webbed-type feet similar to a duck's, but larger and more deadly looking. It stood about three feet high and its body tapered off into a tail that stretched for perhaps ten additional feet behind the body.



Figure 55. Jeremiah Clotskey with a fossilized sample of a possible homeless-eating monster (Gaskell 2003).

“Apparently there is a monster that comes out in the summer and eats homeless people!” claimed Sandra Brasell, an employee at the well frequented Java Joes. Similar claims have been were made by another local observer, “There’s some monster fish in the river. You better watch where you put your feet in the river when you sleep, those fish will eat you up!” he added. The river itself can also swallow with no hesitation.

The sinking of a restored paddleboat highlighted the downtown river in the summer of 1995. Two years prior, Michael LaVelle had gone into business with several local entrepreneurs. The idea was indeed new to Des Moines: it offered a floating culinary experience.

Michael and his colleagues had purchased a paddleboat and revamped it into a floating restaurant serving gourmet meals on the river as the boat cruises south to the Center St. Dam and back to the local marina. One day, tragedy struck. Michael recalled, “I got a call one evening and it was my business partner. ‘Come watch the boat sink’ he said.”

A homeless woman, supposedly deranged, had cut the boat free from its moor and sent it over the Center Street Dam. As rescuers attempted to raise the boat, the local media had turned a tragedy into a spectacle on the riverfront. Thousands have gathered to witness that rare event. “To my chagrin, the boat was more popular under the water than above,” he remarked. In a way,



Figure 56. Michael continues to dream of getting the paddle boat in action again. The paddle wheel and the remnants of the Spirit of Des Moines is now housed in an outdoor open-garage.

the downtown river had become a stage or a trap placed for impending disasters. Only at times of trauma does the city come alive to witness the river's wrath. The boat was not destined to stay at the bottom of the downtown river. The river wasn't deep enough any way. The river was deep enough however, to claim the lives of numerous Des Moinesians since the first pioneers came and settled in Des Moines.

I was at the Center Street Dam one evening to inquire a local angler for river stories. Expecting tall fish-tales or killer-monsters, he surprised me some local wisdom about another killer on the river, "It's really messed up, the river grabs you like hands, pulls you down and roll you around for weeks! It really ain't that deep, but if you're not six-foot-six, then six feet of water will kill ya." The man was referring to the dam.

From afar, the dam looked rather timid. When the water is high, the dam is lucid and loud. That year, the water was low. I had initially assume that the dam was a curvilinear wall. That day, my assumptions were shattered. The dam was formed in a series of zig-zagged walls. I could imagine what physical damage it could to the paddle boat that went over them. Yet I could not picture how a man can be swallowed whole by the river given its depth and clarity. In August of 2002, my conjecture was proven wrong again. A kayaker felled prey to the tumbling waters at Scott Street Dam.

Steven Nourse was an avid kayaker. From the news headings I knew he had a family with kids, a picket fence and a home in suburbia. What compelled him to attempt a run over the dam that faithful day is still a puzzle. The Downtown Des Moines River had been off limits to kayakers for decades. Perhaps being on the water amidst the



Figure 57. The Center St. Dam reveals its true form.

hustle and bustle was too tempting of an experience to skip. I recalled my experience on the river. It would have been thrilling to course over the dams.

Steve went over the dam without a life-vest while a colleague was paddling quite a distance behind him. There was no foul play. Steve was quite aware of his actions. Unfortunately, the rolling water at the bottom of Scott St. Dam had other ideas. He was caught in a washing machine that was on a 'permanent cycle'. He was finally released by the river ten days with much prolonged grief and remorse. Des Moines Register writer, Sara Tennesen (2002) wrote:

Unable to win the help of authorities, friends of Steven Nourse gathered along the shore again Thursday, waiting for the Des Moines River to give up his body. Nourse, 45, of Woodward, is believed to have drowned Saturday night as his kayak went over the Scott Avenue dam in Des Moines. Because fire officials called off the search Sunday, Nourse's friends have asked that the river level be lowered in hopes it will aid in the recovery of his body.

Jim Stiman, the Corps of Engineers chief of water control, said Thursday the agency will lower the river, but only after an official request. Fire officials haven't made a request, they said, because reducing the outflow from the Saylorville Dam would do little to help. Some friends say they've seen the body surface briefly several times since Sunday.

The City has no authority on the flow of the Des Moines River. The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers did. The day the federal government began controlling the flow of the river through locks, gates and dams, it had relinquished any form of ownership of major rivers from cities across the nation. For a city that was named after a river, Des Moines really had little to no influence on the downtown river's affairs.



Figure 58. 'Landscape as Character': the Scott St. Dam is a deceptive killer, yet it is celebrated as a popular fishing spot.



Figure 59. Steven Nourse, a paddler in a rivertown.

PLAN AND THEY WILL COME



Looking from 40th floor of the Principal Building, a shadowy tower stands as a testament to Des Moines urbanity. Surrounded by lesser buildings, the core of downtown Des Moines seems like an island in itself. There is no true gradation in verticality. Surrounded by warehouses, parking lots, and scattered businesses, this background collides onto a vertical mass like a water ripple edge stopped by a wall. With the State Capitol sixteen blocks east, this scheme sets up an almost surreal valley of concrete proportions.

Figure 60. The Principal Building on 801 Grand Avenue soars over downtown Des Moines.

A new facelift is destined for Des Moines again. Only this time, the river got all the attention. In lieu of public budget shortages and increasing pressures on the city to increase its tax base, the Principal Financial Group, Des Moines largest employer, had offered to lead a reconstruction effort on the city's riverfront to revive downtown Des Moines. The Principal Financial Group (2002) reported:

Today there are many exciting projects and a great deal of momentum to move Central Iowa forward. However, we believe there is something missing: a project that ties the various developments together, unites the east and west sides of the river, spurs housing and commercial development (particularly on the east side), and uses our untapped asset—the rivers.

“In a sense, Principal is doing what the city had done a hundred years ago. Cities today do not invent cities anymore, businesses do. When you spend millions on a building, you need to make sure the surrounding environment measures up as well. That is what Principal is trying to accomplish.” John was right. The revival seemed timely. The city had been ambivalent towards the downtown river over the last century. In the beginning, it was a celebrated focal point amidst a Civic Center. Plague by maintenance cost, the ornamental qualities on bridges and public plazas have been reduced to embrace more utilitarian qualities. The downtown river was later abandoned when the buildings moved their entrances which faced the riverfront, to their rear façades.

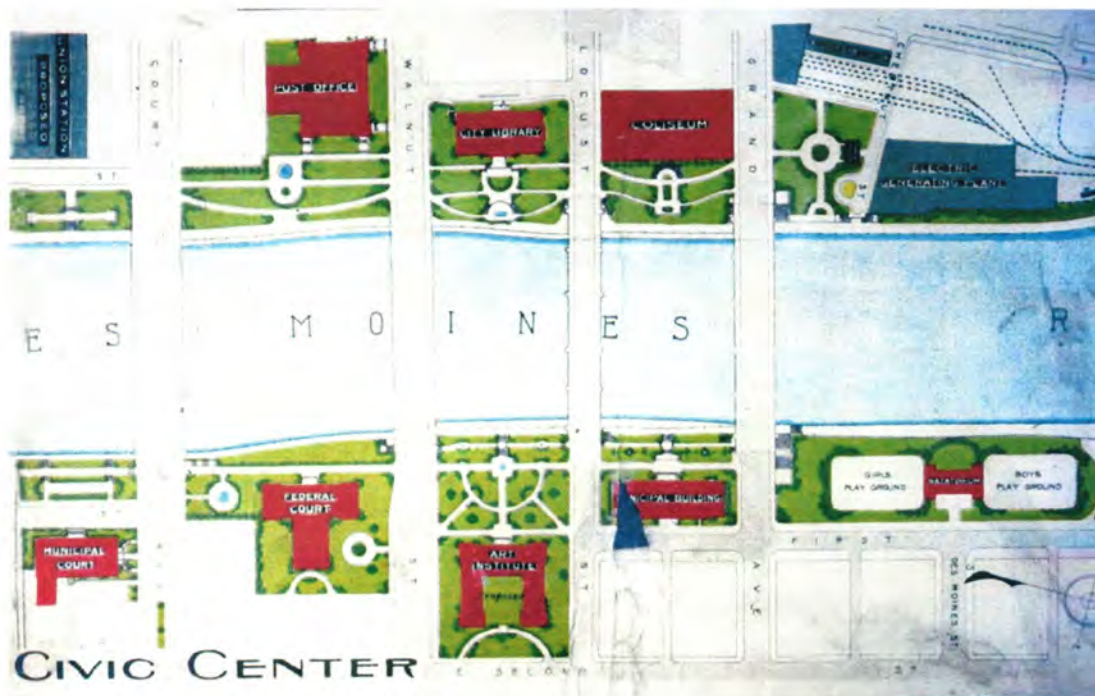


Figure 61. The Civic Center with the Downtown Des Moines River as a focal point (Zeller 2003b).

Mary Challender (2003) of the Des Moines Register articulated the existing conditions of the riverfront in light of the Principal Riverwalk Project:

A bitterly cold wind blows across the grassy slope behind the Public Library of Des Moines. A thin skin of ice covers most of the river, but under the arched bridges that cross Locust and Walnut Streets, dark pools of open water offer hope that winter's days are numbered. At noon on a weekday, the walkway behind the library is nearly deserted except for an occasional office worker taking a shortcut to the YMCA, workout clothes tucked away in a backpack. Nearly a century after Des Moines chose the river as the city's heart, the downtown riverfront serves as a lonely reminder of a civic dream that didn't quite materialize.

The Downtown Des Moines River has come full circle. Can the Principal Financial group revive Challender's civic dream? Will the community embrace the downtown river as it once was or will it remain an entity ambivalent to its historical and cultural significance? The reply is a resounding yes, at least according to the Des Moines Register Editorial (2003), "Build it, and give them something to do there, and they will come. That's true for the Downtown Farmers Market on Court Avenue, Music under the Stars at the Capitol. It could be true for the downtown riverfront, too."

With the new intervention, the Downtown Des Moines River is poised to rekindle an old affair that has turned sour for about a century.

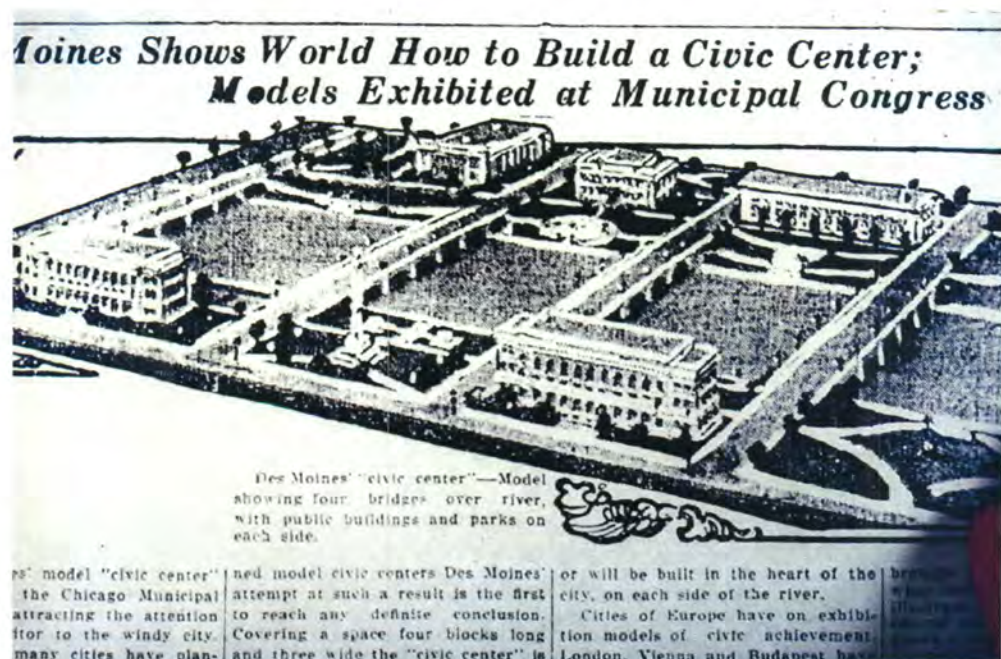


Figure 62. The revival of a hundred year old dream is spearheaded by the largest corporate entity in the city, the Principal Financial Group (Zeller 2003b).



Figure 63



Figure 64



Figure 65

Figure 63 & 64. Transformation from gardenscapes to hardscapes: the front facade of the Municipal Building became the rear over time (Zeller 2003b).

Figure 65. Among the Principal Riverwalk interventions is a plaza and planting scheme for the Municipal Building (Principal Financial Group 2003).

BROKEN BOTTLES & BENCHES

In the early morning before the sun breaks over 801 Grand, a sporty Lexus races down Woodland Avenue from Sherman Hill to the heart of the city. Sam makes his track from the wooden kingdom to begin his day of toil. He pulls up to a huge obelisk and into a parking garage as big as the local library. In the meantime, hard hats stroll to yet another tar and aggregate rendezvous. For those without a ritual, the day culminates at the end of a bottle.



Figure 66. Light at the end of the tunnel.

My ritualistic walks around the downtown river usually begin at the local YMCA. The green slopes in front of YMCA and the Public Library are stomping grounds for the local homeless population in downtown Des Moines. Aside from ladybugs and spiders, the homeless in Des Moines would be next population in magnitude that ‘patronize’ the riverfront. I have met a and spoken to a handful of homeless individuals by the riverfront over the years.

Brian and Jim are regulars there. They usually begin their daily rituals at ten in the morning. They would scout around for a couple of minutes before they settle down on a spot to enjoy

the sun. “It’s nice here, a little sun, a little breeze, everything’s alright,” Jim said. Under an old honeylocust on the northeast corner of the Public Library, they would enjoy their favorite brown-bagged beverages with concentrated gulps. “The cops don’t come down here that much, they just make sure we don’t cause any trouble at the parks. They might come by to clear us out sometimes, but only when there’s too many people and too much noise,” Brian explained. “This is a river of pain, ain’t nothing much here but a bunch of pain,” Jim cringes.

One morning, Brian directed my attention to a dried splotch of unknown substance under the Locust St. Bridge. “There’s a lot of bad stuff that goes on down there. You see that spot next to the bottle down there? Just some blood from last night. Couple of guys fighting over some girl,” Brian explained.

There’s usually broken beer bottles and refuse along the riverfront. Traces of inhabitation is also evident from abandoned blankets and clothing material. When the homeless shelters are full during cold days in the fall and winter, homeless individuals will congregate under the bridges for warmth next to makeshift bonfires.



Figure 67. Bloodspot, beer bottles and a blanket: signs of human inhabitation and milieus.

Both Brian and Jim frequented the YMCA for showers and other amenities. They would submit themselves to the local shelters at night before a curfew. During the day, they are not allowed to remain at the local shelters. This leaves them wandering astray around downtown until they end up at the riverfront. The Associated Press (Smiley 1999) reported recently about the homeless in downtown Des Moines ‘migrating’ to neighboring suburbs:

The opportunities abound, they can make good money begging and never have to work. They don't have the competition that they have downtown and usually don't have trouble from the police. The recent cold snap has sent many to the 30 shelters in Des Moines, where shelter officials estimate 3,000 to 4,000 homeless compete for 1,400 available beds. There are no shelters in the suburbs. Although their presence is growing, the homeless aren't likely to get shelters in the suburbs soon, officials would prefer locations near Des Moines' downtown and away from residential neighborhoods. There isn't going to be a place for people to accumulate and stay. It will cause a public reaction like, 'NIMBY,' the not-in-my-back-yard thing. The shelters scare people, especially in the suburbs.

Aaron, John and Matt just arrived to Des Moines. They were sitting on a concrete bench next to sleeping bag in front of the Public Library when I met them on a cold spring morning. The sleeping bag belonged to somebody else as I discovered later and it was inhabited. In hindsight, none of us realized there was an individual in the sleeping bag during the course of our conversation.

All three of them lived in the YMCA because it was the cheapest boarding available in town. They couldn't find a job either. “If you are not involved in insurance or auto body work, you won't find much of anything in this town.” John grew up in the Des Moines. He had been in Iowa City but he decided to return home when things turned sour over there as well. “This place is going downhill, there use to be more people here,” he added. Aaron had other observations, “For some strange reason, rivers tend to attract bad characters that do bad things on the river.”

Tim was visiting a friend at the YMCA when I met him. He got out of welfare recently. “It took me a while to get to this point,” he claimed. When asked about his views on the Principal Riverwalk, he shook his head in despair. “My dad built those bridges, I don't want anybody tearing ‘em down. I've seen the designs, they look good. But it ain't gonna change much. There ain't anybody here anyway. I wonder where all the people that use to live here have gone?”

The Downtown Des Moines River, like the homeless population share similar attributes: they are both forgotten ‘elements’ in society. This similarity probably led to the affinity between such marginalized entities in Des Moines.



Figure 68. Ironically, the only intimate relationship the Des Moines has with the river today is through its homeless population.

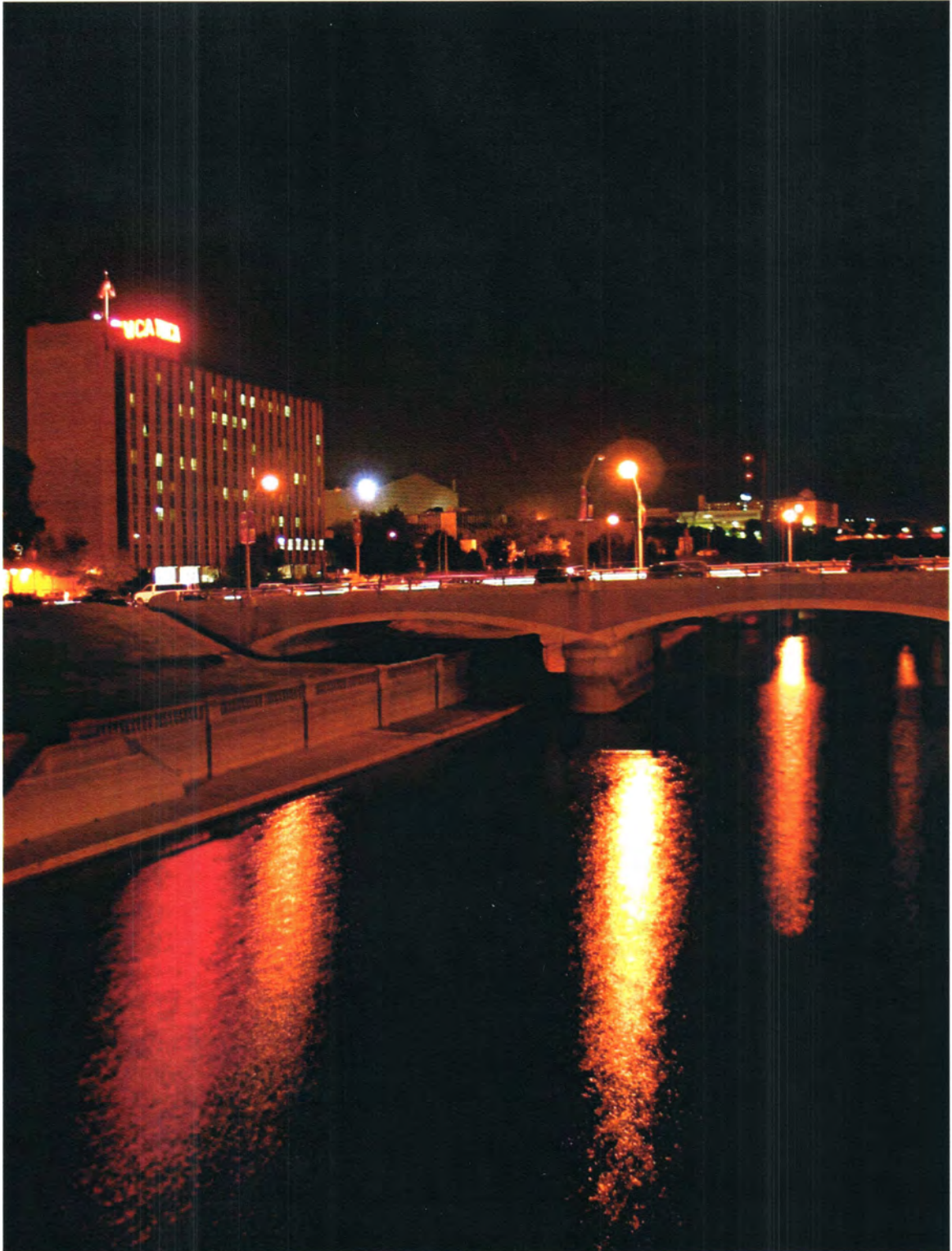


Figure 69. Night time under the bridges is a stark contrast from the well-lit street level above.

All my trips to Des Moines usually end with a visit to two lonely benches at the back of the Municipal Building. Those were the benches that Bob had used on warm days to watch the sunset. Looking across the river from YMCA, the two benches were nondescript. Employees in the Municipal Building can be seen taking occasional smoke breaks by a park bench set outside the rear entrance of the building. The benches are hidden from them by a concrete platform extending west from the entrance. For the two years that I had been to this stretch of the river, I have yet to see the benches used.

As the benches sit quietly on the grassy slope. I would ponder the difficulty that lies ahead for Des Moines and the Principal Financial Group. They will attempt to revive an entity that was abandoned by its own maker.



Figure 70. The sun sets over the empty benches at the back of the Municipal Building.



Figure 71. The benches is a metonymy for the cities neglect and abandonment of the Downtown Des Moines River.

LOOKING CLOSER

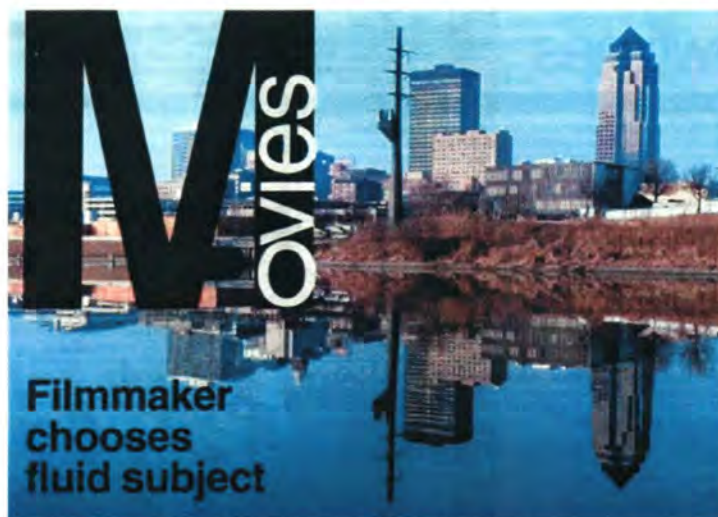
Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops -- under the rocks are the words and some of the words are theirs.

Norman Maclean
A River Runs Through It

As *Looking Closer* came close to completion in the spring of 2004, I had to find a place to screen it. The ideal screening location would be a public arena accessible to all Des Moinesians. Given time constraints, I had to use a private establishment to premier the film. I acquired the services of a local bar, the *Vaudeville Mews*. It was a drinking and non-smoking establishment that hosted local theater events and live bands. I was amazed with the publicity that followed after the media got hold of the press-release. Interviews with local newspapers, radio, and television stations soon ensued. At press time, the movie was screened on three occasions over the second weekend of April at the *Vaudeville Mews*.

Films have a lingering effect just like landscapes, be it natural or designed. In *Film as a Social Practice*, Turner (1999, p. 3) writes:

Popular films have a life beyond their theater runs or their reruns on television; stars, and genres, key movies become part of our personal culture, our identity. Film is a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself.



An unlikely subject, the Des Moines River, is the focus of an hour-long documentary that will be shown at the Vaudeville Mews next weekend.

Soo Wai-Kin, a graduate student in landscape architecture at Iowa State University, views his film, "Looking Closer," as a social and historical commentary.

Soo felt the same disinterest from Des Moines residents about the river as he did from those who lived near a river in Kuala Lumpur, his hometown in Malaysia.

"Other than concerts and festivals, we don't interact much with the river," he said. About a year and a half ago, he started shooting film, conducting research at the State Historical Society of Iowa and interviewing local historians.

"People forgot about the river," he said. "People turned their entrances away from the river."

Indoor and outdoor swimming pools reduced the use of the river for recreation. Westward development moved people in that direction. Most of the people who use the river now don't live near it and therefore don't pass on its history.

Soo said the Principal Riverwalk was one of the reasons he started working on the film, but he didn't set out to focus on aesthetic issues.

"This project offers no solution whatsoever (for the river)," he said. "What it offers is a different way of looking at it."

"Looking Closer" will be shown at 7:30 p.m. April 16-18. Admission is free but donations will be accepted. The Vaudeville Mews is at 212 Fourth St.

Register film critic Jeffrey Bruner can be reached at (515) 284-8266 or jbruner@dmreg.com

Figure 72. The Des Moines Register does a write up of *Looking Closer* (Bruner 2004).

A film does more than inform. The film's content is mixed with memory and dwells in the subconsciousness. Over time, it becomes part of a tale of life's journey through exotic and local landscapes on the cinematic screen. In the process of editing the film, the relevance of film production became consequential not only to formal spatial design processes but the act of envisioning a landscape. *Looking Closer* did not offer any design solution. What it offered was a different way of examining the relationship between a site and its inhabitants. The combination of film and narrative is rich in content and informative for design interventions.

Narratives can provide local knowledge of place to supplement information that a formal survey fails to elicit. Numerous studies across scientific and liberal arts disciplines have used narratives to analyze the human-place relationship with a great degree of success (Desfor and Keil 2000, Robertson et al. 2000). Kaliski (1999, p. 107) proposes:

The city designer reassembles narratives of place in order to intensify and render more visible the ordinary stories of city life. Debate negotiates the process of combining individual and group narratives with the designer's arrangement of these narratives in objects and places. The city thus designed is the simultaneous city of everyday life, celebrated in modern literature and art and sought after but denied by modern architecture and urban design.

In exploring landscapes, we tend to perform two-dimensional abstractions of three-dimensional entities. We write, paint, and draw notational diagrams of places and we leave the human imagination through eidetic operations, to realize those places. Using physical and digital models circumvents the eidetic operation. As visual surrogates, these models do append the missing vertical dimension, thus creating a certain 'reality'. Yet this reality is still far from explaining the palimpsest entity of the landscape. Corner's (1999b, p. 4) *landscape agency* described the need for a change in landscape design from a product concentrated practice to an agent in cultural practice. Corner (1999, p. 4) explains:

When the making of landscape is considered in terms of developmental process, the resulting project may assume any number of formal characteristics, depending on local circumstances and situations. Whether a particular project is naturalistic, rectilinear, formal, or informal is irrelevant; what matters is how the form and geometry of a project makes sense with regard to specific issues it is trying to address and the effects it is trying to precipitate.

Looking Closer attempts to precipitate a discourse between a community that is so far removed from a landscape that city of Des Moines aims to perpetuate. Films have the ability to congeal three core elements, the artist/designer, the observer, and the landscape into a complete entity representing design conception to fruition. If representational drawings were meant to decrease the complexity of architectural propositions for people to understand, film offers

a dynamic proposition for phenomenological interactivity between the filmed landscape and landscape narratives.

A keen sense of reflection is required to develop 'new' landscape narratives. Tuan's (1980, p. 3-8) *Rootedness versus Sense of Place* described how reflection rather than remembrance reveals a sense of place. *Rootedness*, is a concept driven by the pride for one's past and the lived experience of a place through generations. This familiarity of place does not necessarily contribute to a sense of place as much as awareness or the act of self-discovery would. In presenting the resident community an image of themselves in a familiar landscape constructed by their ideals and shortcomings, the act of remembrance and reflectivity is exercised. Aitken and Zonn (1994, p. 6) emphasized, "To represent is to portray clearly before the mind, to give back to society an image of itself, or act a part or a hole."

The way people read stories in the landscape deals largely with the landscape experience and sense of place. From a phenomenological perspective, space and place are differentiated, as Tuan (1977, p. 162) points out, by their level of abstraction. Place is a conceptually bounded entity that evolves from functional, emotional, and cultural processes embedded within all living organisms. Although *space*, when endowed with values, could move along the realm of *space* and *place*. Landscape architectural practice have largely operated within the concept of *place* and in the process we have forgotten about the *space* or *ordinary landscapes* as opposed to the elusive *place* or *special landscapes* that landscape designers seek after.

As society become more desensitized to the everyday environment, ordinary landscapes are merely transitional spaces of no social or phenomenological significance. These spaces bear no distinction if it is not bounded by designation or name. Relph (1976) *Place and Placelessness* pointed out a category in which such spaces would correspond to: *planning space*. A *planning space* is concerned primarily with function in a two dimensional map space and not based on experience of space (Relph 1976). The Downtown Des Moines River has become such a space.

Berque (qtd. in Déchamps 2001, p. 169) emphasized on the importance of human perception, "Societies interpret their environment according to the way they manage it, and they manage their environment according to the way they interpret it." If the city continues to perpetuate the downtown river as an business oriented entity, the significance of the river will be ignored. Does a landscape have to be a destination or a *special landscape* to achieve significance? Tuan (1978, p. 133) writes, with great perplexity, when confronted by different modes of the landscape experience: "Do we really want to live in a world in which, for example, the success of an event is absolutely guaranteed by the physical environment in which it is held? Momentarily, I feel tempted to say 'yes' because it removes me from all obligation to say anything sensible." This sensibility, perhaps, merits discussion.

Significance and meaning of place does not necessarily occur at the completion of a design. Meaning can be derived from any point of a design process. Treib (1995, p. 47-62) argues that 'meaning' and significance results less from the effects of a particular design than from the personal pursuit of seeking pleasure in a landscape.

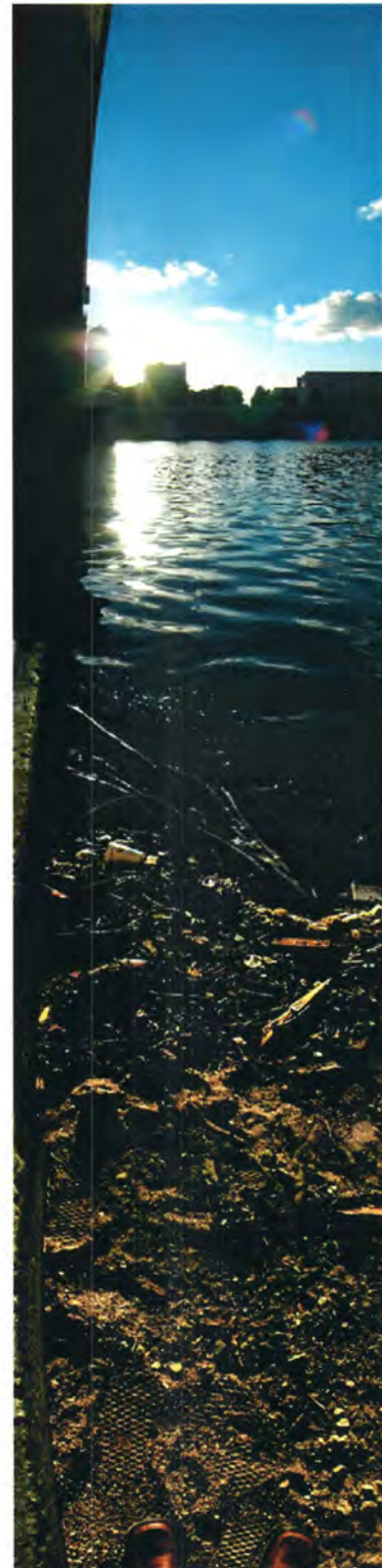
The practice in landscape recovery is carried out through *Looking Closer*. The film hopes to place Des Moinesians in a position to view themselves in the landscape. It is an eidetic exercise that provokes a discourse between a community and its namesake. With landscape narratives from the past and present, the Downtown Des Moines is revealed in entirety from the standpoint of the *resident community* and not the 'expert'. It also provides a small voice for the marginalized, in this case, the homeless and the downtown river. The Downtown Des Moines River is portrayed as a setting, character, subject, and symbol through different segments of the film. The proverbial stage is set for the social protagonist and antagonist.

Should history serve Des Moines a lesson, the city's next evolution could perhaps embrace the narratives of the past and present to shape tomorrow's Downtown Des Moines River.

*Tonight IS the night of the sandbar...
Let the light traverse this mass of black gold
Leave the empty bottles full of hopes,
Where I would find it satiated,
And flow home knowing how to cope..*

*Well, nice to meet you,
Leave me more messages
Don't let the horizon dampen your ebbs
Don't let the concrete dampen your course
You're my backyard now
So tell me your stories....*

Figure 73. Standing on the edge of the Downtown Des Moines River.



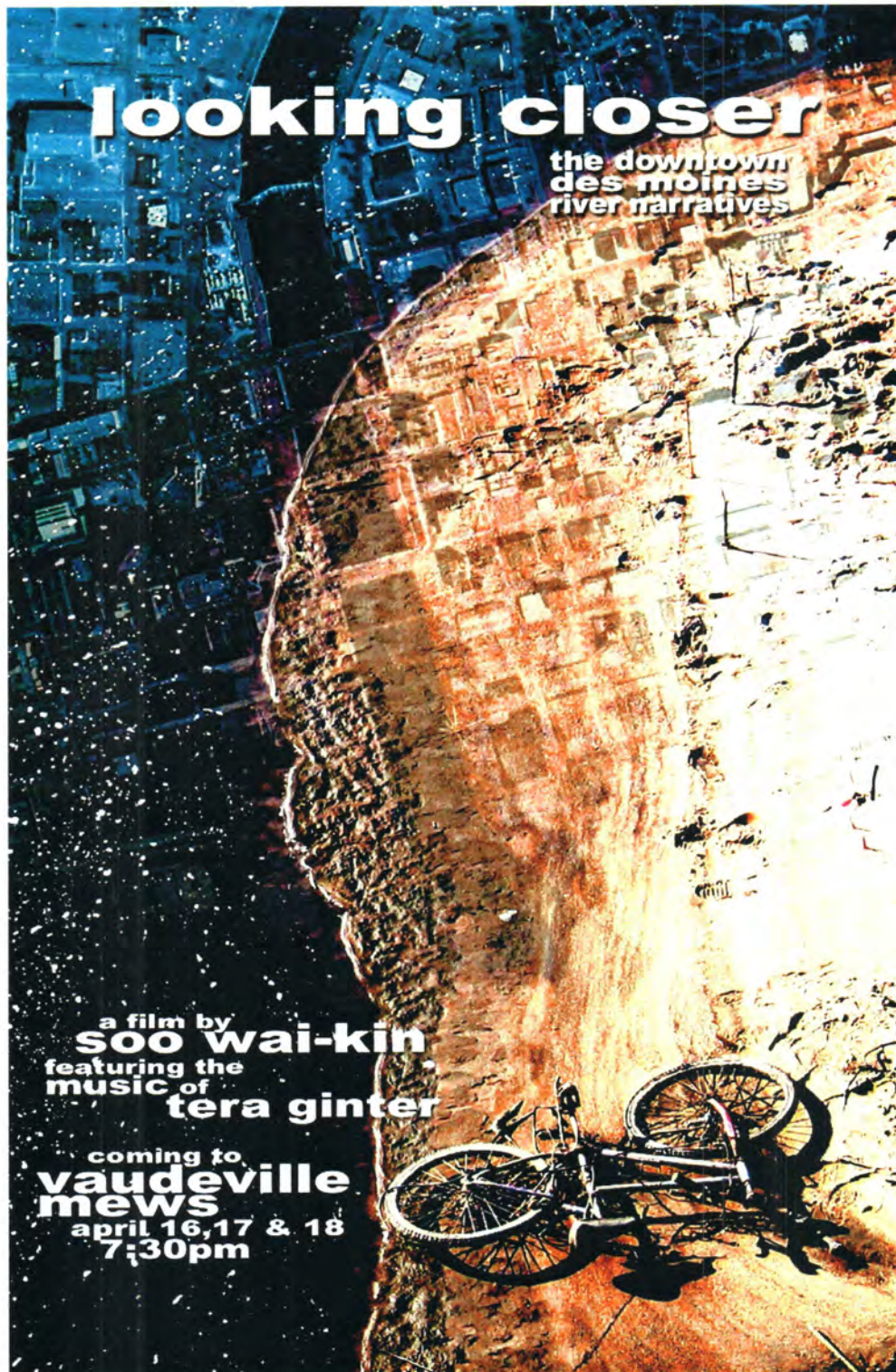


Figure 74. 'Landscape as Subject': The film poster combined different scales of *seeing* a landscape: an aerial view where a city planner would most likely operate in and a ground level scene where a resident would encounter on a daily basis.

APPENDIX: LOOKING CLOSER - THE FILM

FILM DETAILS

Director and Producer

Soo Wai-Kin

Cast

Gerry Rowland, Ralph J. Christian, Michael R. LaVelle, Tim Courtney, Robin Paul, David B. Dahlquist, Swapnil Mandrekar, Aaron Shaw, Forey Jacobson, Mary Kay-Wilcox, Laura Popen, Joe Kelderman, Autumn Griffith, Sandra Brasell, Kathy Townsend, Peter Brud, Brandy Proulx, Alec Johnson, Alan Zahn, Brent Yezek, Nora Wendl and Hollis Monroe.

Rated

Unrated, mild language.

DVD Features

Region free, Color. Letterbox widescreen. Scene selection.

Running Time

57 minutes.

Hardware and Software Requirements

Playable on home DVD players , PC and Mac DVD-ROM Drives.

Windows Media Player, Apple DVD Player, PowerDVD, WinDVD Player, and other standard computer software DVD players.

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