

San Antonio plans new downtown district

In the 1960s, two elevated Interstate highways were built along the edges of an old, mixed-use area north of downtown San Antonio. The result — no surprise, in retrospect — was that the area pretty much languished for the next 40 years.

Now, however, the City and the San Antonio Downtown Alliance are completing an ambitious plan that would bring thousands of new residents, as well as parks, stores, offices, and amenities, into the 377-acre precinct, dubbed “River North.”

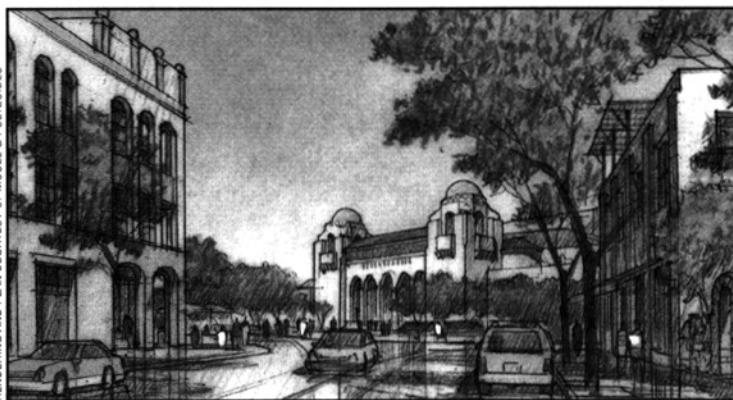
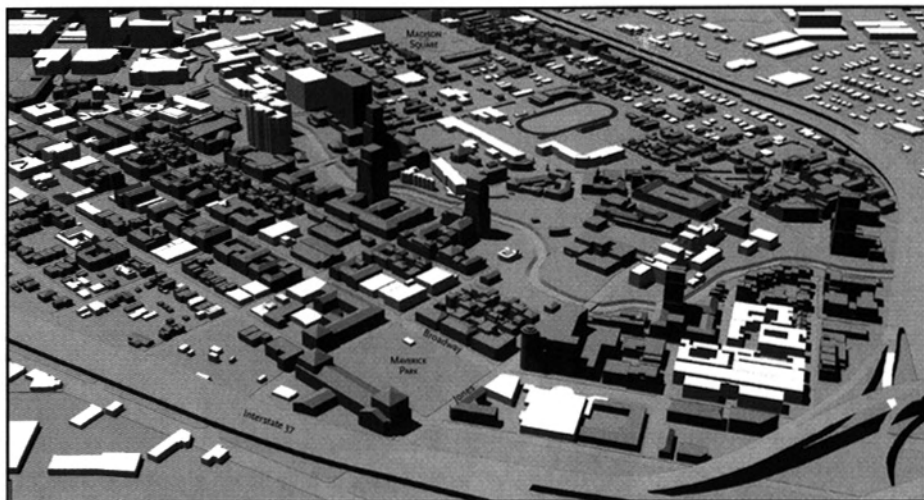
Over the past several months, Stefanos Polyzoides, David Sargent, and others at Moule and Polyzoides Architects and Urbanists have been working with local organizations on a master plan aimed at producing distinct places and neighborhoods. The chances for success appear strong — in part because the district is traversed by the San Antonio River, which is already a prime attraction where it flows through downtown.

“There’s a huge amount of private capital that’s ready to come in here,” says Sargent, who is Moule and Polyzoides’ project director for the San Antonio undertaking.

The Pasadena, California, firm began studying the area and conducting a charrette last year — around the same time that the city and county, with federal and private help, started extending San Antonio’s well-loved River Walk about two miles northward through the River North district. The River Walk, which meanders through downtown one level below the surrounding streets, has done much to turn San Antonio into a tourist mecca in recent decades.

The hope is that when the Walk expands northward as part of \$68 million in public improvements to the river — including a new lock and dam that will make more of the river navigable — the district will become prime territory for mixed-use development.

It’s been hard to get developers to build housing downtown, acknowledges Ben Brewer, president of the Downtown Alliance. Property owners often hold out for hotels, a more lucrative investment in a downtown that’s been able to support more than 12,000 hotel rooms. North of downtown, says



An aerial view of the River North district is shown above — dark buildings would be new. A proposed streetscape is at left.

Brewer, “we can create a high-density residential neighborhood that we think will be very attractive to locals.” Sargent adds: “This project has the potential to rebalance local uses and tourism.”

A patchwork of parking lots, vacant parcels, and the backs of low-rise buildings would be transformed into a series of park-like spaces overlooking the public River Walk. Bordering the four “parks” would be residential and mixed-use buildings three to 20 stories high.

The plan, a final draft of which is being completed this spring, calls for an “open and natural character along the river,” with key building facades placed where they “terminate figural open spaces.”

UTILIZING THE GRID

“It is very underutilized land for the most part,” Sargent says of River North. “It has a wonderful street grid, pretty much 300 by 350 feet with alleys, which is good.” Broadway, decades ago the highway to Austin, would be narrowed

from seven lanes to five lanes plus parking. “The goal is to widen the sidewalk on each side by a full lane,” says Brewer. The Broadway neighborhood’s gap-toothed urban pattern would be encouraged to fill in with two- to six-story buildings, containing retail on the ground floor and housing or offices upstairs.

Polyzoides has argued for installing a street trolley, which would pick up passengers at the Alamo downtown and head north to the San Antonio Museum of Art, the AT&T Corporate Center, and the historic Pearl Brewery. Silver Ventures, headed by local businessman, Kit Goldsbury, is making the former brewery the focus of a mixed-use development — both new construction and adaptive reuse — that will cover several blocks and contain 600 to 800 residential units. AT&T is considering building its world headquarters in the district.

The plan envisions private investments generating half a million square feet of office space, about 250,000 square feet of retail, and 5,500 or more housing

units. Andrés Andújar, head of the San Antonio office of the architecture and engineering firm Parsons 3D/I, devised the River North concept, which is being spearheaded by the San Antonio Community Development Corporation.

In December 2006 the City Council established a tax-increment reinvestment zone covering 194 acres, allowing taxes from development there to be used to pay for such things as street improvements and burial of utility lines. A form-based code for the area will help to ensure that new buildings define appealing public spaces. A "Park Once" utility will provide strategically located parking structures that will serve businesses, residents, and churches around the clock. All the structures will conceal

their parking behind business or residential uses. By decoupling parking from specific development sites, planners believe this strategy will promote development of smaller parcels.

One of the toughest challenges is how to soften the effects of the elevated Interstates 35 and 37, which define the northern, western, and eastern borders of the project. Five accomplished local architectural firms — Lake Flato; Alamo Architects; Overland Partners; Ford Powell & Carson; and Michael G. Imber — participated in the charrette. One of them, Lake Flato, focused on "healing the gap where the river goes under the expressway," Sargent notes. Park-like areas, including an "urban forest," may border parts of the expressways, Brewer says. ♦