

Urban Waterfront Manifesto

Water is a defining force that fundamentally shapes the character of each place it touches. The role of water in transport, industry, sanitation and nourishment made it the *raison d'être* of human settlement. It is a feature to be honored and celebrated — not to be treated merely as cosmetic or as just a commodity.

Waterfronts, the unique places where land and water meet, are a finite resource embodying the special history and character of each community. Urban waterfronts, like the cities they help define, are dynamic places. The last three decades have witnessed profound changes along abandoned or underused waterfronts. The trend is accelerating in cities around the globe. It applies to canals, lakes, harbors and rivers as well as coasts.

With this growing popularity comes a tendency by some to look for the quick solution, to adopt a formula that may have worked somewhere else. In the 1980s it was the “festival marketplace” fad. In the 1990s, it was the “urban entertainment district” and/or stadiums. In a time of pervading sameness and homogenization worldwide this is particularly dismaying because waterfronts above all factors give each community a chance to express its individuality and help distinguish it from others.

We urge careful consideration of the following principles. They are offered in the spirit of encouraging communities to aim for distinctiveness as they undertake the challenge of converting or conserving their waterfront resources.

- It is essential to keep in mind the inherent public interest in waterfronts, reflected in public ownership of water itself.

Planning

- Waterfront planning should be long-range, comprehensive and holistic and should encompass all relevant disciplines. It should use all appropriate technologies and encourage a system of sustainable growth and operation.
- Meaningful community involvement is integral to valid waterfront planning and development. It should begin early and be continuous.
- Waterfront work is not just about economic development, is not simply a design question or only about environmental issues. Rather it is a fusion of these and related disciplines that should be sought.
- We encourage communities to think long-term in waterfront work. Many conversions take 10, 15 or 25 years. The understandable desire to achieve instant results should be resisted in all except the smallest steps. Development over time allows a richness of character versus the sameness of a one-time “Big Bang” approach.
- It should be remembered that every waterfront is an integral part of a watershed consisting of creeks, rivers, estuaries or bays.

Development

- The best undertakings involve a partnership between the dynamism of the private sector, the stewardship of public entities and the energy of citizens.
- Public access to and along the urban waterfront should be the hallmark of all projects, including residential developments. This means physical and psychologically welcoming access. Visual access to the water likewise should be a pervading objective.
- It is vital that communities distinguish between learning from good examples of waterfront planning and development elsewhere and blindly copying them. Waterfront concepts and projects should flow from the nature of each place and embody its essential spirit.
- Where possible, a diversity of uses wants to be included along waterfronts, from passive parks to vibrant commercial attractions. People of all income levels and cultures should feel welcome. Nighttime activities as well as daytime can be provided. Distinctive places for children as well as the elderly should be included.
- Waterfronts present unparalleled opportunities for interpretation and education — of natural values, community history and culture, including notably the industrial and transportation activities that often preceded today’s developments. Preserving and interpreting the tangible aspects of the history of a place provides character and meaning to waterfront development.
- The tendency to clean up waterfronts should be approached carefully so that rich underlying values are not unnecessarily sacrificed. Preferences for uses that require access to water is important, even if they are somewhat unsightly.
- Public art installations should be encouraged and the active participation of each city’s arts community sought from the outset of waterfront planning, to ensure that artists’ special way of seeing things is incorporated.