



2013 Remaking Cities Congress

Re-Positioning the Post-Industrial City in the Global Economy

Case Study Summary

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Urban Design—Remaking More Than Downtown

Larry Witzling

University of Wisconsin

October 3, 2013

Milwaukee is located near one corner of the Great Lakes megalopolis. For those unfamiliar with this geography, think of our city as that middle place between Chicago and the Green Bay Packers. For many years, Milwaukee struggled to get beyond its reputation as a blue collar town with great beer and sausage. Ironically, post-industrial Milwaukee celebrates its local beer and sausage, and the creativity of its working class manufacturing base. One of our newest industrial projects is a local brewery in our Menomonee Valley industrial park that will be combined with a large beer garden. In this new place, all the elements come together—industry, entertainment, mixed use, jobs, good beer and sausage. In other words, Milwaukee’s success in redefining itself has been as much about attitude as substance. Milwaukee reflects an attitude that embraces its past as it creates its future.

The social and economic statistics that define Milwaukee will not surprise anyone. Diverse and shifting demographics that impact other cities also underlie Milwaukee’s urban conditions. Also, Milwaukee’s historic political roots—often filled with conflict—have been rekindled in the last decade only to emerge with new debates over transit, employment, and social values. In spite of these controversies, other less publicized initiatives have tackled problems leading to pragmatic solutions. For example, Milwaukee’s longstanding reputation for “sewer socialism”—that is, the concern for creating and maintaining a high quality of public infrastructure—has not weakened (although funding, as always, remains a struggle.)

While this presentation will show many positive changes, there are still many challenges that remain unresolved, such as insufficient funding for urban infrastructure, ineffective transit, growing social inequities, and greater economic competition from the surrounding Great Lakes region. Addressing these ongoing challenges requires Milwaukee not only to adapt to post-industrial realities, but also to build upon Milwaukee’s earlier pre-industrial and industrial heritage.

From an urban design perspective, the texture of the city is regenerating itself. Milwaukee suffered, like many cities, the insults and substantive injuries of urban renewal and freeways. However, our latest generation of redevelopment has truly viewed the city as an urban form that must be addressed holistically. The texture of streets and public places is returning with the physical demolition of an unneeded freeway, the construction of public housing using paradigms of new urbanism, and most importantly, the recognition that a City rests on its neighborhoods—each of which now have strong, locally grown (and resourced) plans that are being implemented.

Re-industrialization vs. Post-Industrialization

Milwaukee's industrial activity might be better characterized as "re-industrialization" rather than "post-industrialization." To some this may seem like splitting hairs, but it does reflect how we view our urban past and future. Many of our efforts are not based on the notion of replacing our past industrial success, but rather building upon those successes. Undoubtedly our past factories, their size, layout equipment, and operating processes are all changing—but they are still, at their core, industrial and manufacturing processes that are constantly reinvented. While some older factory buildings become high-priced residential lofts, new manufacturing facilities also emerge—sometimes in the same districts. While Milwaukee's colleges and universities expand, so too does our focus on job-training.

Decades earlier, our factories were fully integrated with our neighborhoods—beer and sausage were part of the daily industrial routine at the tavern across this street from the factory. Today, as I noted, the tavern and the factory are being built together. Our urban gardens, farm-to-food restaurants, and burgeoning underground art scene also need to be physically and socially integrated with our new workplaces. When you look closely you can see that pattern emerging. In the same way that our active streets are growing together, so too are our three economies—industrial, post-industrial, and pre-industrial. In the immediate future I would hope Milwaukee can earn the title of a fully "re-industrialized city," more so than the more frequently noted concept of a "post-industrial" city.

Re-Industrialization as an Attitude

As a "rust" belt city Milwaukee is reemerging on the Great Lakes as a "blue" belt city. We see our proximity to an abundance of potable surface water not only as a valuable symbol that can bring new investment, but also as a significant resource offering landmark economic development opportunities. Beyond the water, which we share with many other cities represented at this conference, we have a reservoir of industrial talent embodied in businesses, skilled workers, buildings, and solid physical infrastructure. Some cities share these traits, but what may make Milwaukee different (in my view as a city booster as well as an academic) is the degree to which this industrial history has been, and still is, recognized as the backbone of our urban vitality.

Milwaukee has an attitude of pride in its "history of making." One of our earliest branding efforts was a poster claiming "Milwaukee feeds and supplies the world." What would you expect from a city whose baseball team is called the "brewers" and whose football team (albeit a two hour drive from downtown) is named after meat "packers." Aside from this sports/food fetish, or perhaps because of it, the last 25 years included three specific industrial projects that need to be recognized—(1) the re-emergence of the Menomonee Valley as the heart of our industrial geography, (2) the current effort to re-industrialize a 100-acre abandoned site (dubbed Century City) and (3) the future potential for the industrial redevelopment of an often overlooked but highly valued piece of our lakefront Port known as the Inner Harbor. These three industrial projects define Milwaukee's successes and challenges with regard to re-industrialization

The Next 25 years

Over the next 25 years there are several trends that are likely to become stronger and impact re-industrialization in Milwaukee and American cities in general. First and foremost is the dominance of neighborhoods. I do not think these plans will be ignored or that “neighborhood planning” will become an outmoded planning practice. Rather, these neighborhood plans will be revisited, revised and redoubled in their importance. Within the next 25 years, Milwaukee must also develop some form of streetcar transit. As one of the largest North American cities without such a system, we should build upon the glory days before World War II when Milwaukee had one of the nation’s best local and regional transit systems. Lastly, for planners, I expect a national shift toward efforts of decentralization in terms of energy, food, education, and other systems that are essential to sustainable regions.