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### Urban Land Institute Uses L.A.'s First Street as Laboratory for Planning and Urban Design

Los Angeles provides the setting for the next generation of planners in the Urban Land Institute's Gerald Hines competition.



Christopher Lollini



Bill Gilchrist

*The Urban Land Institute's annual Gerald D. Hines competition challenges diverse teams of graduate students in planning and related fields to create revolutionary but realistic plans for an actual project area. This year, the national competition focused on L.A.'s own First Street. TPR spoke with Birmingham, Ala., Planning Director and jury chair **Bill Gilchrist**, FAIA, and **Christopher Lollini**, team captain of Tectonics, the winning team from **UC-Berkeley**, about how the next generation of planners addressed the enormous potential of this Eastside corridor.*

**ULI chose Los Angeles and 1st Street in particular as the site for the Hines Competition. What was the appeal of this corridor?**

Bill Gilchrist: The L.A. district of the Urban Land Institute is a very active member of the ULI family and they worked with us to come up with this site. We looked for one that leveraged the inter-disciplinary approach of the Hines competition, and we wanted it to have enough aspects to challenge a range of design and development skills.

This particular corridor afforded the opportunities to address many issues: transit, with the extension of the Gold Line; the urban and environmental reclamation of the Los Angeles River; the demographic differences on the east and west sides of the river; and the urban design challenges of enhancing existing community icons through the proposed development or other design interventions.

**Christopher, did you or your UC Berkeley team have any preconceived notions of L.A.?**

As a transit guy, I was interested in how the different densities play into and how they can be affected by transportation itself. It was interesting that the Gold Line ran through the whole project site. The interplay between that and the urban fabric on both sides of the project area was intriguing to us. Knitting all that together was a challenge, but we loved it.

**The jury cut 100 submissions down to four finalists. Did common themes emerge from those submissions?**

BG: We saw a broad range of approaches—many were quite sensitive in terms of their contextual design. Others, we might say, resuscitated certain approaches from the '60s and '70s: a grand idea imposed over the project area. The jury had extensive deliberation and diverse advocacy for certain selections over others.

In terms of the development program, we were looking closely at the environmental responses, and teams came up with different approaches to address issues, such as storm water management, which, for the most part, related to design attitudes about balancing the river hydrology with brownfield redevelopment and reclaimed industrial

land.

I think the clearest distinctions among submittals related to urban design: Did the scheme capitalize on the Gold Line Extension? Did it recognize that Los Angeles is considered under-served in terms of public and open space? Did it look at opportunities to connect both sides of the river? When the scheme focused on development recommendations along First Street—were they contributory or insular? Did they enliven the street edge? Or did they create more lively internal spaces?

Some submissions looked at demography and economics in interesting ways. Some understood the distinction between using median incomes as a measure of investment opportunities versus using the communities actual purchasing power as an operative indicator to induce regional commercial and institutional development.

**What themes did your team's solution emphasize? What development projects does your team recommend?**

CL: Our plan was called "tectonics;" during the presentation I think we beat that theme quite to death.

We saw different neighborhoods and districts colliding along "fault lines," one of them being the huge infrastructure corridor of L.A. River as well as East 1st Street. We saw East 1st Street as more of a formal corridor connection for transit and vehicles. We saw a more informal corridor for pedestrians as we brought the open space down to river and over the river with our park, "The Mesa," and it continued up to the Pico Aliso and the Mariachi Plaza development.

Essentially we tried to get all these different groups to come together and create spaces in which all of these individuals can interact while also respecting the fabric, cultures, and demographics of the neighborhoods.

**How realistic is this plan in the context of L.A.'s economy, urban fabric, ordinances, and regulations?**

BG: First and foremost, it is important to recognize that this is an academic exercise that would need to go through much more rigorous investigation to properly answer that question. Nonetheless, the selected plan acknowledges the fact that the city needs more open space and open-space programming.

The challenge, certainly along the river, is to what extent the hydrology allows you to create a beautiful, full waterway flowing at a recreational speed versus accepting that the regional hydrology and proximate surface developments may not allow the river to reach that condition for some time. The selected scheme acknowledged the hydrologic and urban conditions along the river and created open spaces at a rich range of scales appropriate to development opportunities. One thing the jury found compelling in this scheme was that the Mesa design looks at the river in this way of context and character.

The jury still had some questions about how to bring that much open space into an existing urban fabric and acknowledged that open-space programming would be critical to this scheme's overall success.

The question of how realistic this or any scheme would be, of course, depends on financing, which in this case would hinge greatly on the city or redevelopment authority linking the private investment opportunities with the public space expenditures. They must ask: How much does it cost to build? And what will the economic impact be that generates revenue back to bottom line for taxes? These questions should be posed and answered before any commitment of public dollars can be assured.

The jury felt the scheme could examine further what private investment could be built and how fully the city could leverage the array of open programmed spaces the scheme proposes for this part of the city. Given what we've seen happen in a many other cities, we felt this scheme offered great potential in this regard.

Finally, this scheme addressed not only a need for open space in this immediate part of Los Angeles, but given the range of scales and locations, it also could be a destination for the region as a whole. So, with a more rigorous

examination and exploration, the selected scheme could portend enormous possibilities to enhance the current thinking about revitalizing this important area of Los Angeles.

**When your team began responding to the First Street opportunity, what planning values and choices informed your work?**

CL: We realized that we needed to not only integrate the different districts in the area, but also to allow for some stability in the neighborhood structure. That was achieved through the affordable housing and different levels of affordability that we were implementing. The key was creating two residential towers that would fund the affordable housing and open space that we integrated in our development site.

As far as the rest of the green infrastructure, we conveniently got somewhat of a blank check in the eyes of the competition, but we had to balance being practical with being bold. We feel that if you create an area where people are meeting, interacting, and using a space that they demanded, then something like that can be leveraged and would be accepted by the community as opposed to a more top-down, overbearing proposition.

BG: That's very well said. And it's interesting: you are almost able to evaluate some of the submittals according to whether they felt like they were top-down, either by the government or marketplace fiat, or a more inflected approach that understands the demography and the demand of the population that is already there. This plan understands the infrastructure that is already there and complements some need or deficiency that is broadly based, rather than just dealing with some development that is solely based on its return on investment or on the impact on traffic.

**This First Street site has been talked about in L.A. for years. Did you look at other plans, such as Project Restore's First Street plan? If so, were they helpful? Did you incorporate any of its features?**

CL: The two major plans we looked at were the L.A. River Revitalization plan and Project Restore's plan. We also went outside of that to understand what the people in the surrounding area were like. My group actually spoke with the head sensai at the Buddhist Temple, and he wanted two things. He wanted a nicer public space, because they do festivals, like the Obon Festival, behind their site, which is essentially a paved-over parking lot. And he also wanted to maintain his view of the skyline.

Incorporating elements like that was key in our eyes—to be reverent to the fact that there are people living here and they have certain needs. Another one of those was that the CDC for Little Tokyo has been demanding a recreation center for the last 30 years. That was another key component of our plan.

**If you wished that at least one aspect of your plan were adopted, what would that be?**

I'd think The Mesa. I'd like to come down here in 20 years and see them decking over the rail yard and using that as a platform to green the sides of the L.A. River and then eventually, let that green creep down into this huge infrastructure core and turn this hardscape of Los Angeles into a soft, green area that is a little bit more livable. And The Mesa bridges the east and the west of the river and creates a centerpiece through which open space connections can be made throughout the city.

**Bill, you are from Birmingham. How does L.A. compare to Birmingham?**

Big. What struck us driving around yesterday doing the site reconnaissance is that Los Angeles is so much denser than many people realize. I know this just from my professional discipline, reading about the city, and knowing my colleagues out here, but people have this impression that everything is destinational—from freeway exit to freeway exit or on-ramp to exit. We have not been on the freeway once since getting to the airport. This is an area that works off the grid, and there is character, and there is a neighborhood base, and there is a real fabric of urban form in Los Angeles. Hopefully that will be respected in all the planning that you do in the next several years.

*(Editor's note: Christopher Lollini spoke on behalf of his UC-Berkeley team, comprising Andrea Gaffney, Brooke*