

PLANNING



SPECIAL ISSUE ON CHICAGO

Deal Making in the Second City

Riverfront and Lakefront

Transportation Hub to the Nation

You Want Green? We've Got Green

Downtown Surprises



River, Front and Center

It's taken three decades, but the city is finally making the most of a major asset.

By Robert Cassidy

One of the city's downtown bridges, from above.
Photo by Alex MacLean

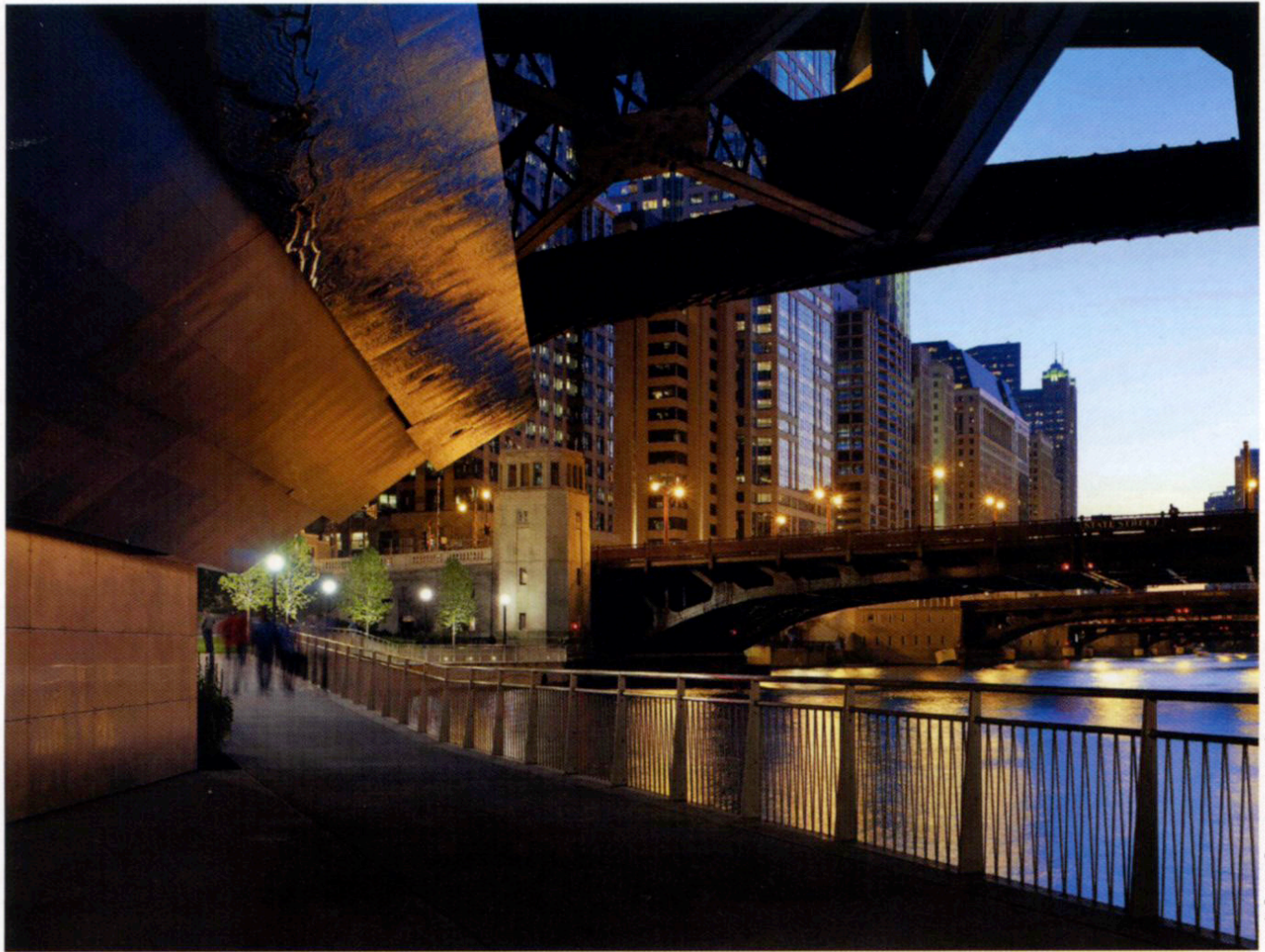


Photo by Kate Joyce, Hedrich Blessing Photographers

Fourteen miles of riverfront have public access—including this section near Wabash Avenue—but the city plans to open up all 28 miles.



VER THE LAST THREE DECADES, THE CHICAGO

River and its adjacent lands have undergone a remarkable metamorphosis. Walk along the Main Branch of the river from Lake Michigan west, and you can almost sense the magnetic impact of the river on real estate development. The many new residential towers and town houses and magnificent skyscrapers that have sprung up over the years—most recently, the 92-story Trump International Hotel and Tower—are testament to the magical effect of a water vista on property values.

You'll feel the riverfront's vibrancy: new restaurants and cafes, landscaped vistas and pocket parks, and places of respite, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial plaza. If your timing is right, you might catch the

giant arc of water shooting across the river from the Nicholas J. Melas Centennial Fountain or watch the downtown bridges lifting to accommodate the sailboats making their way to and from Lake Michigan.

Take note of how clean the river looks. No, it's not quite ready for swimming, but you'll see plenty of kayakers and canoeists on the river, thanks to a significant improvement in water quality. At the "fish hotel"—a raftlike structure moored at the Dearborn Street bridge—you might spot one of the more than 70 species of fish that now call the river home.

The Chicago River of today has become a highly valued asset to developers, property owners, environmentalists, recreation enthusiasts, and city officials. As it cuts a wide swath through the heart of downtown, it opens up splendid vistas—and daylight—for office workers, commuters, tourists, and, increasingly, new residents. The Chicago River has taken its rightful place beside Lake Michigan as a natural resource to cherish and nurture.

It was not always thus. In August 1979, I wrote an article for *Chicago Magazine* entitled "Our Friendless River," which began: "The Chicago River is the city's most



The Riverwalk's Vietnam Veterans Memorial Plaza, built in 2005, features a granite wall inscribed with the names of 2,900 Illinois service members.

neglected natural resource. It is overshadowed by Lake Michigan, disdained by environmentalists and outdoorsmen alike, neglected, fouled, and abused by industry and by all the rest of us. Nonetheless, it is the second greatest gift that nature has bestowed on this city.”

Taking charge

It's not as if the city was operating in a vacuum. Numerous studies addressing the Chicago River were completed during the mayoralty of Richard J. Daley: the 1966 Comprehensive Plan, the 1973 Chicago 21 Plan, the city's 1974 Riveredge Plan, the Metropolitan Sanitary District's 1975 land management study, and the 1979 Chicago Central Area Committee's *Chicago River Promenade* report.

Despite this wealth of research and analysis, industry continued to befoul the river (the Clean Water Act was still in its early days of implementation), developers kept using up valuable shoreline that should

have been preserved for public access, and raw sewage flowed into the river every time it rained, thanks to the city's outdated combined sewer overflow system. It was a sad fact that the thing most people remembered about the river was that it was dyed green on St. Patrick's Day.

It was in this context that my article offered a three-point plan for the Chicago River: first, the establishment of a citizens group to advocate for the river; second, an immediate halt to further loss of riverfront access pending additional planning; and third, passage of a planned development ordinance to guide future riverfront projects of an acre or more in size, with special care to preserve public access.

To my amazement, a half-dozen civic and environmental leaders took up the cause. Our first public meeting, in October 1979, drew more than 100 people who became the nucleus of the Friends of the Chicago River.

Over the course of the next few years,

we worked with the administration of the newly elected mayor, Jane Byrne, to gain passage of the stopgap planned development ordinance. And while I burned out after three years as chairman, over the next three decades, Friends of the Chicago River established itself as one of the most active civic and environmental groups in the city.

The next level

Current planning for the Chicago River rests on work that goes back to the late 1990s, according to Nelson Chueng, AICP, coordinating planner in the city's Department of Housing and Economic Development.

In 1999, the city, under Mayor Richard M. Daley, completed two reports prompted by the reconstruction of East-West Wacker Drive. The first, prepared by MRA International and the Lambert Group for the city Department of Transportation, presented a vision for the South Bank of the river from Wolf Point to the lakefront, including physi-

cal improvements, entertainment and event programming, commercial real estate opportunities, and the river as a “centerpoint destination” for residents and tourists.

The second, the Chicago River Corridor Development Plan, posited five guidelines: 1) a *connected greenway* to link 28 miles of riverfront promenades; 2) *public access*, even for private developments; 3) *landscaping and restoration of natural habitats*; 4) *improved recreation amenities*—canoeing, boat launches, fishing piers, etc.; and 5) *economic-development*, such as cafes and restaurants, as well as enhancement of the waterway by existing industrial and commercial businesses.

The city’s planners also developed a set of Design Guidelines and Standards, chief of which required all new developments within 100 feet of the river (except residential projects up to three units) to be planned developments subject to review by the Chicago Plan Commission. A 30-foot setback from the river became standard.

The timing was good. The next decade brought a boom in residential construction. “Developers were marketing higher quality units along the river,” says Chueng. “That allowed us to get land contributions for large master planned developments and build new waterside parks,” such as the three-acre A. Montgomery Ward Park (formerly Erie

Park) in the River North neighborhood.

In conjunction with the Wacker Drive reconstruction, public investment—notably \$29 million for the section from Lake Michigan to State Street—created eight miles of public riverwalk, with the private sector adding another six. It’s not all contiguous, and there are points where bridges block the path. In all, 14 of the river’s 28 miles have gained at least some degree of public access.

Emanuel: ‘The next frontier’

The next stage in riverfront development began in July 2009, with the issuance of the Chicago Riverwalk: Main Branch Framework Plan. A design team led by Skidmore,

LAST YEAR ALONE

Friends of the Chicago River took **3,200 students** on field trips to the river.

More than 8,000 volunteers participated in Chicago River Day 20/20, a 20-day-long cleanup and recreation initiative.

Two hundred stakeholders joined the Calumet Eco-Warriors, a program to protect that South Side region’s valuable ecological assets.

The Friends’ museum, housed in the five-story bridgehouse at the southwest corner of Michigan Avenue and the river, drew **13,000 visitors last summer**.

And **750 people** took part in canoeing and kayaking through the Friends’ paddling program.

Guided paddling trips by Friends of the Chicago River expose people to the beauty of the waterway and the surrounding architecture.



Photo by Cristina Rutter

Owings & Merrill, working on behalf of the city's Department of Zoning and Planning (now Housing and Economic Development) and the Department of Transportation, established guidelines for the construction of a continuous walkway from Lake Michigan to Lake Street.

The document established six principles, notably bringing people to the water and creating unique places, "new economies," and improved commercial functions along the riverwalk. The Main Branch was divided into four distinct districts—the Confluence, the Arcade District, the Civic District, and the Market District—each of which could be "programmed, branded and mar-

keted" to "attract patronage" in support of the new commercial functions that would flow to these districts.

However, riverwalk planning was unexpectedly put on the back burner on September 7, 2010, when Mayor Daley announced he would not seek a seventh term. It was revived barely a year later when Daley's successor, Rahm Emanuel, declared the Chicago River to be "the city's next recreational frontier." In announcing plans for four new boathouses along the river, Emanuel declared, "Much like Lake Michigan is Chicago's front yard, the Chicago River is our backyard, and should be an asset that people across the city enjoy, not avoid."

Emanuel's vision was made palpable this past October when a design team commissioned by the city and led by Sasaki Associates unveiled a proposed \$95.5 million build-out of the south bank of the river along six blocks, from State Street west to Lake Street.

This latest Riverwalk plan is stylistically ambitious. Each block is to have a theme: "The Marina" (State to Dearborn) will have restaurants and public seating; "The Cove" (Dearborn to Clark) will host kayak rentals and nonmotorized boat docking spaces; "The River Theater" (Clark to LaSalle) will feature a full-width staircase cascading upwards to Upper Wacker Drive; "The Swimming Hole" (LaSalle to Wells) will have a zero-depth fountain (much like the one in Millennium Park) for children to splash in; "The Jetty" (Wells to Franklin) will create an ecological learning center; and "The Boardwalk" (Franklin to Lake) will have floating gardens and a new bridge to bring people to the river from Upper Wacker.

The conceptual design for the three blocks from State to LaSalle is 90 percent completed and ready for construction, while the three westerly blocks are about 10 percent designed, says Gabe Klein, commissioner of the Chicago Department of Transportation, which is man-

aging the project. The Riverwalk will be 25 feet wide between bridges, 20 feet wide under the bridges, and 50 feet wide at Wolf Point, where the three branches of the river meet.

Klein is optimistic about getting funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation's \$17 billion Transportation Infrastructure Finance Innovation Act, and the city will seek sponsorships from private donors and foundations, as was the case with Millennium Park.

"Tourism is a huge growth opportunity for the city," Klein says. "The mayor has said that if Chicago could move up one notch in the list of most-visited cities, it would be worth millions. Maybe the Riverwalk would encourage tourists to spend an extra day in Chicago."

Cleaning it up

The resurgence of the Chicago River would not have happened without TARP, the Tunnel and Reservoir Plan. The so-called Deep Tunnel's 109-mile system can take in 2.3 billion gallons of stormwater in its huge tunnels and underground Majewski Reservoir, near O'Hare International Airport.

Two more reservoirs should be completed by 2029, at which time the problem of combined sewer overflows from severe rain events should be laid to rest, according to David St. Pierre, executive director of the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (formerly the Metropolitan Sanitary District).

St. Pierre says that TARP, which cost \$3.5 billion, has done "a tremendous job" in cleaning up the river. One indicator: In 1972, there were two fish species in the river. Today, there are more than 70. Much work remains to be done, however. The MWRD must comply with a recent court-ordered ruling to install disinfection technology by the first half of 2016. (For more on MWRD projects, see "From Rooftop Gardens to Deep Tunnels" in this issue.)

Lessons from the river

The experience of those who have worked on the Chicago River may be instructive to planners and public officials in other cities.

FORM COALITIONS AROUND KEY ISSUES. A few years ago, when Asian carp threatened native species in Lake Michigan, a coalition led by Friends of the River fought a proposal to essentially poison the river to kill the carp. "Thirty years ago, when the river was





Photo by Alex MacLean

Chicago is known worldwide for its bascule (lifting) bridges. Thirty-eight of them span the river. CDOT raises them, according to a published schedule, in the spring and fall to allow pleasure boats to pass.



The latest Riverwalk plan divides six downtown blocks into thematic sections and includes a waterfront theater (far left) and a boardwalk referencing the city's maritime history.

full of sewage, people didn't care what happened to it, and Friends would have been alone in that fight," says FOCR executive director Margaret Frisbie.

MAKE NO LITTLE PLANS. A familiar refrain in Chicago, but it still holds true. Klein says that when CDOT chief engineer Dan Burke and planner Michelle Woods approached him with the Riverwalk concept, he took it right to Emanuel. "I told them the mayor is going to love this. So we went big. If we put a proposal in front of the mayor that is functional, game-changing, and fiscally responsible, he's going to find a way to do it."

BE CREATIVE WHEN SOURCING FINANCING. "People get stuck in a rut of where to go for funding," says Woods, CDOT's Riverwalk project manager. According to planner Nelson Chueng, "It's all about leveraging funds, through land donations, private [money] donations." In the current economic climate, he says, "We just don't have the luxury to spend whatever we want."

CREATE FLUID LINKS. "The city's transport system is a network, and the river itself is a kind of living, moving organism," says Klein. It's important to link transport modes—cycling, walking, boating, kayaking—to serve multiple groups of stakeholders.

On the drawing boards: the Bloomingdale Trail, 2.65 miles of abandoned railroad right-of-way. "It will be a continuous path of uninterrupted travel," an elevated linear park connecting communities from Goose Island and the Chicago River west to past Kimball Avenue, says Gia Biagi, the Chicago Park District's director of strategy and policy. (For more on the Bloomingdale Trail, see "In Transit" in this issue.)

TURN YOUR WATERWAY INTO A LEARNING EXPERIENCE. Portions of the new Riverwalk, such as The Jetty, will provide a classroom experience for children in the heart of downtown. "They'll learn about the ecology of the river," says Woods. "The riverbank does not have to be just a sidewalk. It can be so much more than that." The intent of the Riverwalk plan, she says, is to allow people to "celebrate and enjoy the river."

MAKE SURE TO PROVIDE ADEQUATE SETBACKS. Ten feet of setback is not enough. Chueng suggests 30 feet instead. "You can do a lot in 30 feet," he says. "You need a paved walkway, but you also want land-

"... If we put a proposal in front of the mayor that is functional, game-changing, and fiscally responsible, he's going to find a way to do it."

Gabe Klein, commissioner of the Chicago Department of Transportation

scaping, and activity nodes, and transition zones"—places of respite where people can pause and relax. Setting a 30-foot setback standard in the Riverwalk design guidelines was "one of the best things we ever did," says Chueng.

BE PREPARED FOR LARGE-SCALE DEVELOPMENTS. "You can't wait till the developer walks through the door to think about waterway planning, because by then it's almost too late," Chueng adds. "You need to be 'plan-ready'—almost like being shovel-ready.

You need to have your framework in place. These projects are going to be around for a long time, and you have to be ready for them when they come in."

THINK OF YOUR WATERWAY AS YOUR CITY'S FRONT DOOR. Cities that are blessed with waterways should think of them not only as precious resources that require nurturing and planning, but also as windows to the very soul of the community. Says Chueng, "In many cases, the condition of a city's waterfront is a reflection of how well the city is doing."

Boathouses Promise to 'Activate' the River

In September 2011, Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced plans to build four boathouses on the Chicago River, at a cost of about \$4 million each. Two are expected to be ready this spring.

In Chinatown's Ping Tom Memorial Park, architect Chris Lee, of Johnson & Lee, designed a facility for canoe and kayak enthusiasts, who will also have access to the park's existing natatorium, community center, and bicycle rental operation. On the North Side, the Clark Park boathouse, designed by MacArthur Foundation "genius" Jeanne Gang, doyenne of Studio Gang Architects, will offer canoeing, kayaking, rowing, and bicycle rental, plus an indoor tank for rowing teams to use in the winter. Both projects enlisted the services of architecture students from the Illinois Institute of Technology.

Another boathouse will be located farther north, at River Park, while a fourth will be sited on the South Side. Both are scheduled for completion in 2014.

The boathouses are part of a larger scheme by the Chicago Park District to connect the city's communities, says Gia Biagi, the park district's director of strategy and policy. "We used to spend a lot of time thinking about acres per thousand residents and distance to an amenity," she said. "Now, our thinking is that it's not how far you are from a park but how long it takes you to get there." If an expressway blocks your route to a park, it doesn't matter how close it is, "it's not your neighborhood park," she says.

The boathouses, notes Biagi, signal the growing role of recreation for the river. "It's been a working river, and under Mayor Emanuel, we're also turning it into a recreation asset," Biagi says. "That's a really new lens, to get all the public agencies to see it as a recreation resource." The park district owns 300 acres along the river, but the holdings are scattered. Says Cathy Breitenbach, the park district's director of lakefront operations, "We're giving people access to the river that they haven't had before, but we have to connect the nodes," whether through bike trails, walkways, or river access. "That's the next big thing" for the park district, she adds.

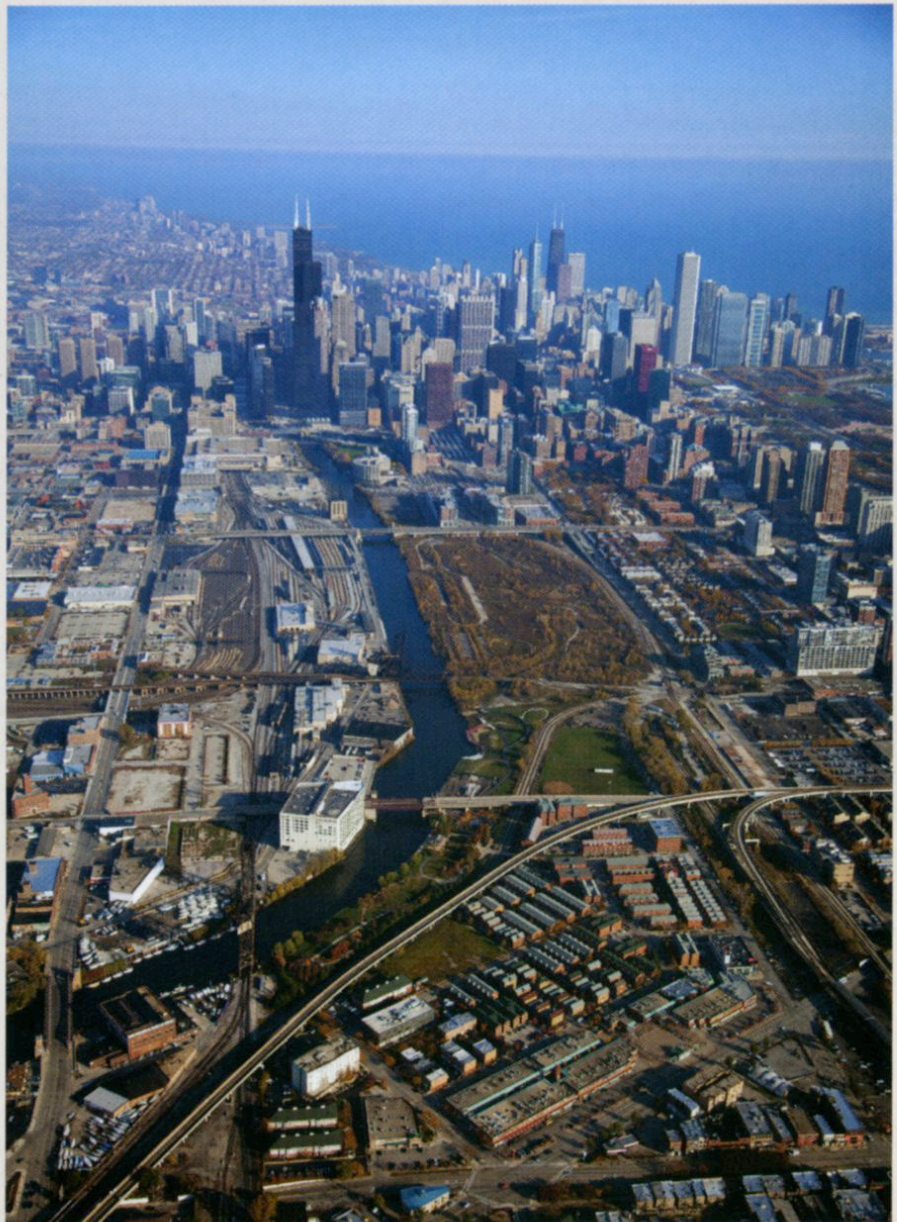


Photo by Alex MacLean

A new boathouse in Ping Tom Memorial Park in Chinatown, just south of downtown, will be ready this spring. The facility will link in with the park's existing natatorium, community center, and bicycle rental operation. Three more boathouses are planned.



Rendering by dpict Visualization

New Life for Wolf Point



Photo by Alex MacLean

Wolf Point, where the three branches of the river meet, today and as envisioned. The \$1 billion project includes open space, housing, and offices.



Rendering by Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects

One of the more spectacular developments along the Chicago River is taking shape at the nexus of the Main, North, and South branches, at Wolf Point, on a 3.9-acre triangular parcel owned by the Kennedy family, one-time owners of the

Merchandise Mart.

The \$1 billion project—being developed by the Kennedys, Houston-based Hines, Chicago's Magellan Development Group, and the AFL-CIO Building Investment Trust—calls for a 525-foot, 510-unit residential structure and two office towers. Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects of New Haven, Connecticut, is the chief designer, in collaboration with local firm bKL Architecture. At 3.75 million square feet, the three buildings will have nearly as much interior space as the Willis Tower (formerly Sears Tower).

"We love being on the river," says Hines vice president Scott Timcoe. Three years ago, the firm completed 300 North LaSalle Street, which features a riverwalk with a food court open to the public. "It's a phenomenal success," he says. Hines is also developing River Point, a 45-story office tower at 444 West Lake Street. The \$400 million project, designed by New Haven-based Pickard Chilton Architects, will provide 1.5 acres of public access on the west side of the river.

Wolf Point will have 939 feet of riverwalk with a 30-foot setback and terraced seating overlooking the confluence of the three river branches. Nearly 60 percent of the site—2.3 acres—will be preserved for open space. "It's a commitment to open space like nothing I've seen in Chicago," says Timcoe. "Our goal has been to have these buildings sit as lightly as possible on the site." Landscaped gardens, a cafe, public restrooms, a water taxi dock, and elevator access (when the office buildings come on line) are planned. The buildings themselves will be green—a minimum silver LEED rating.

If approved by the local alderman, the Chicago Plan Commission, and the city council, construction on the apartment tower could begin later this year. ■

Robert Cassidy, editorial director of *Building Design+Construction*, holds a master's in urban studies from Yale and was a planner in Arlington, Virginia. He was *Planning's* editor from 1974 to 1977 and is the author of *Livable Cities: A Grass-roots Guide to Rebuilding Urban America*. He cofounded the Friends of the Chicago River and served as its first chairman.