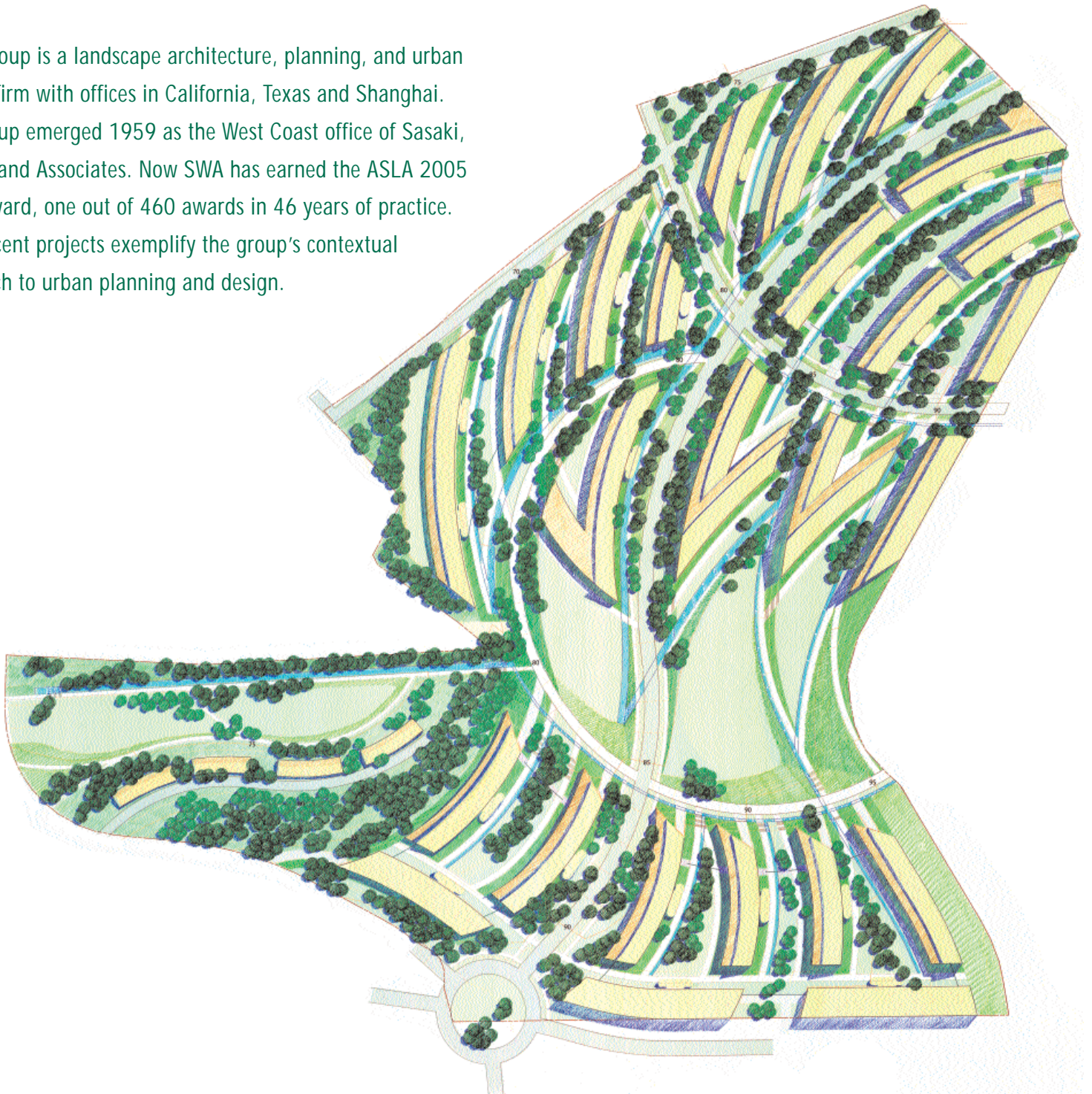


LISTENING TO THE LAND

SWA Group is a landscape architecture, planning, and urban design firm with offices in California, Texas and Shanghai. The group emerged 1959 as the West Coast office of Sasaki, Walker and Associates. Now SWA has earned the ASLA 2005 Firm Award, one out of 460 awards in 46 years of practice. Four recent projects exemplify the group's contextual approach to urban planning and design.



HORIZON, MARNE-LA-VALLÉE, FRANCE

SWA Team: Sean O'Malley, Robert Jacob

Area: 21 hectares; 250,000 square meters of office space

Status: Design development for phase one; on hold since 2003



Unlike other firms directed by a single design guru, whose signature design sense comes through in everything he or she touches, SWA Group's strength lies in the diversity of its designers. "There is no SWA Style per se," says Nancy Fleming, a principal in the Sausalito office. "It is never form for form's sake."

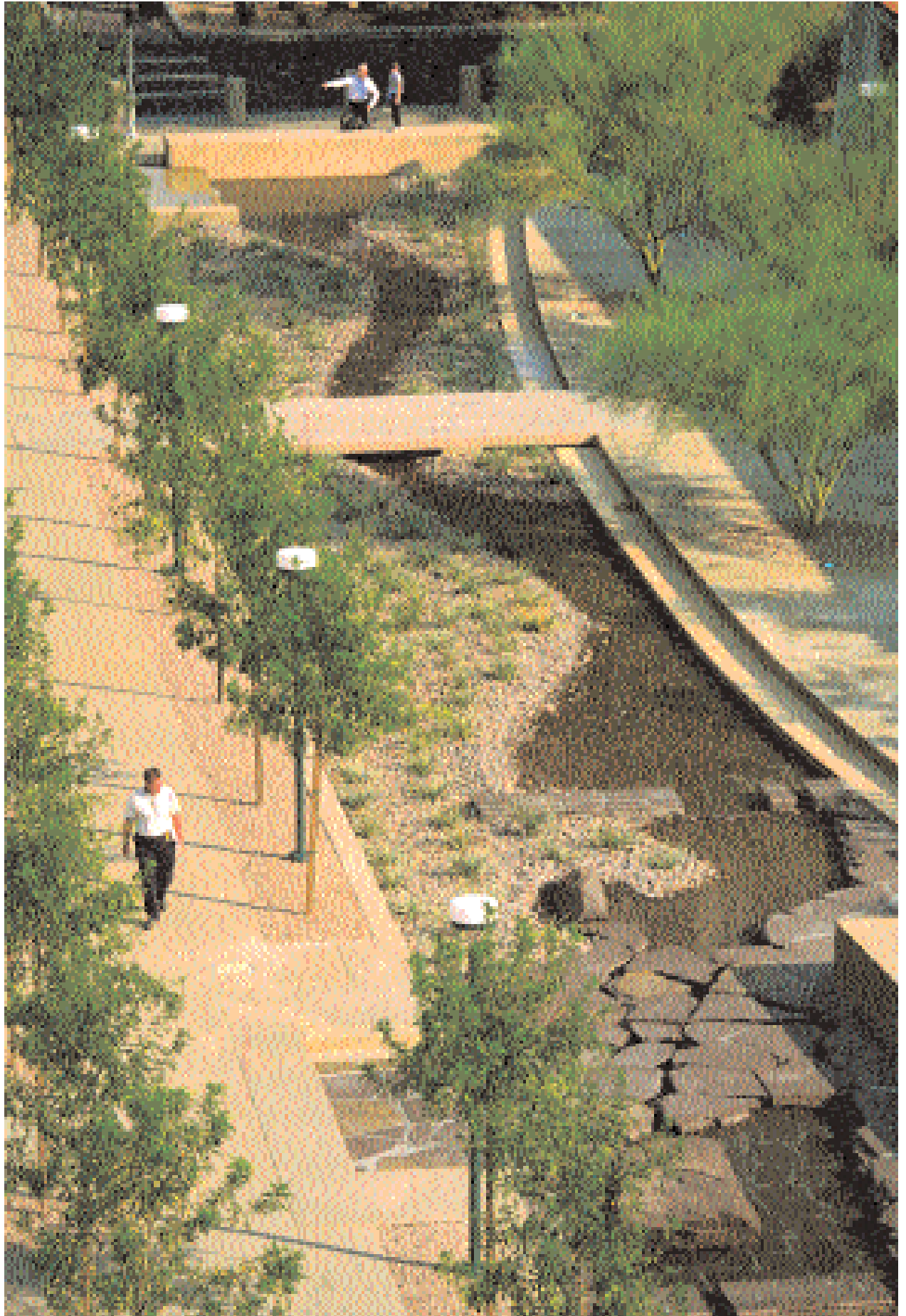
Instead, SWA responds to urban space as urban land, not simply buildings. "When we design cities, we first approach it from the aspect of environmental infrastructure – the drainage courses, topography, remaining forests and wetlands," says Laguna Beach principal Sean O'Malley. "It's the most important framework for a city, and where our design inspiration comes from." This attitude lets SWA draw out the deepest layer of a project's history – its natural and cultural history – whether for a redevelopment plan of an old city, or a new city designed from scratch.

Business Park Horizon near Paris

"The closer you look at the land, the easier the solution is," says Sean O'Malley. "The site tells you what has to happen." Such was the case for the 21-hectare business park O'Malley and his team designed in Marne-La-Vallée, France, twelve kilometers east of Paris. They used the site's greatest challenges – steep slopes, clay soils, and the resulting storm-water runoff – as drivers for design. Topography dictated the form: a continuous canal winds its way down stepped terraces, tracing a path to the Marne River. Twenty-five buildings run along the water, snake-like, terminating in sharp corners where they meet a central meadow. The buildings are ten to twelve stories high at the top of the hill (where they meet the central business district) and two to three stories high at the bottom (to better blend with the buildings on the other side of the river), and surrounded by a lush pine and birch forest. O'Malley explains: "The architectural forms of the buildings take second stage to the form of the landscape, which responds to the environment first and foremost." The resulting design is, admittedly, "kind of crazy ... but beautiful because it marries function and art, architecture and landscape, into one expression."

SWA was sure that the architects – who came on board six months into the design process – would be appalled by the proposed structures. "In

The design for the 21-hectare business park in Marne-La-Vallée proposes buildings that fit into the topography of the steep site. In this instance the landscape determined the architecture.



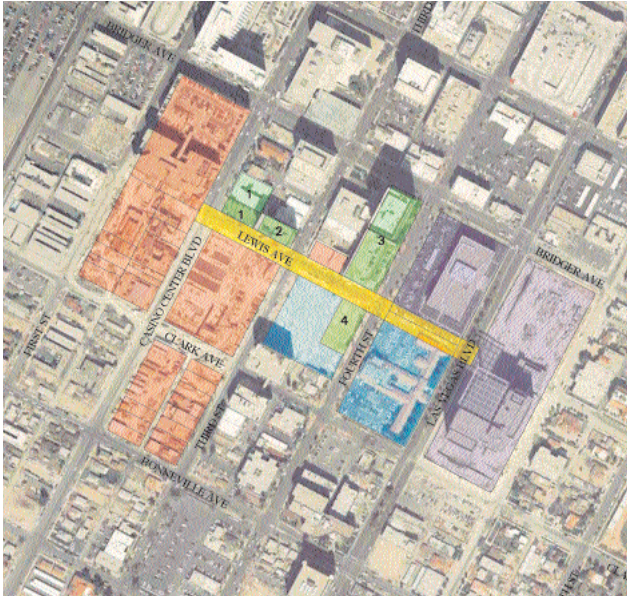
LEWIS AVENUE, LAS VEGAS, NEVADA, USA

SWA Team: Jim Lee, Lawrence Reed, Patrick Curran, Rick Story, Sergio Lima

Area: 3 city blocks

Costs: 1.8 million US dollars

Completion: September 2002



the U.S., the typical response would be: these crazy pointy buildings aren't going to work!" says O'Malley. But to their surprise, the architects were thrilled with the plan and barely touched it, even transforming the quirky corners into fire stairways so as to better integrate them into the final plan. According to O'Malley, the architects' response typifies the difference between Europe and the U.S.: "There's a greater appreciation for design in Europe, which allows some of these dreams to become reality, and adds wonder and excitement to their cities. You'd be hard-pressed to find somebody who would even entertain this kind of design in the U.S. But in Europe, the door is open."

Lewis Avenue, Las Vegas

Before the landscape architects arrived on the scene, street life on Lewis Avenue mostly consisted of office workers scurrying along sweltering stretches of asphalt from their cars to municipal buildings. The derelict street discouraged lingering: the four-lane roadway was over-scaled; parking lots separated the new federal courthouse from the rest of Lewis Avenue; and the narrow sidewalks lacked shade (essential in a town where summer temperatures regularly climb above 37 degrees Celsius). Already involved in three redevelopment projects in the area, SWA was hired to revitalize the entire three-block stretch, which the city hoped would act as a social center and anchor for the office district, and jump-start private business and residential investment – no small feat in a city notorious for sprawl.

Inspiration first struck during the flight into the city. From the airplane, the design team could see the desert landscape in all its glory – a tan palette sparsely dotted with green and veined by flash floods. But as they approached the city, the desert landscape gave way to a riot of pool-flecked, low-density housing developments and asphalt. "When you're in downtown Las Vegas, there's no sense that you're in the middle of a desert," explains principal Jim Lee. "So we decided to cut away the parking lot to reveal a bit of that larger context, and offer a contrast to the urban environment." After narrowing the road to create wide, tree-shaded sidewalks, SWA devoted an entire block to a pedestrian-only plaza planted with native arroyo plants and desert trees. A cobblestone-lined stream meanders

Lewis Avenue, with its shading trees and urban watercourse, is one example of how design can be employed to turn inhospitable car parks into user-friendly open spaces and paths, even in a city like Las Vegas.

COTSWOLD 2000, HOUSTON, TEXAS, USA

SWA Team: Nancy Fleming, Scott Slaney, Tim Peterson, Lance Lowrey, Rhett Rentrop, Lucinda Statler, Kevin Shanley

Area: 90 city blocks

Costs: 30 million US dollars

Status: Begun 1997; completion expected in 2007

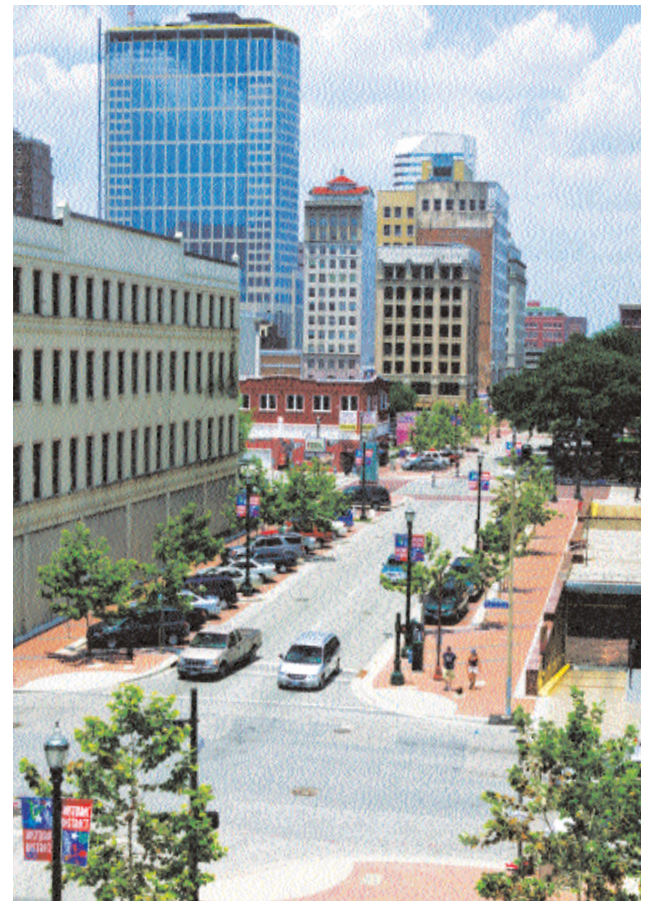
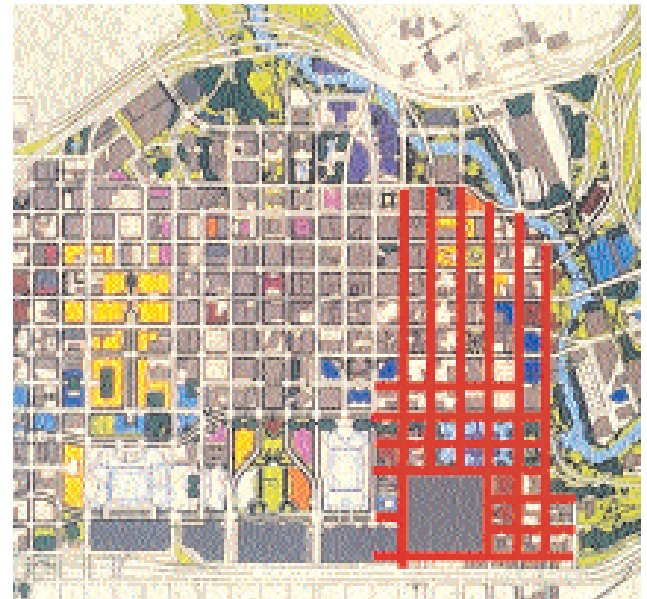
across the plaza, bordered by pedestrian promenades and evoking a desert wash – an irregular channel carved into the land by the flow of water from sudden heavy rains. No longer a brutal concrete jungle, Lewis Avenue is now an oasis for local workers and residents, attracted to the office buildings and loft-style apartments that have begun cropping up nearby.

Cotswold 2000

As urban legend goes, everything's big in Texas – big hats, big hair, big talk – and until recently, the streets in downtown Houston were no exception. The disproportionately wide roadways (some originally designed to allow a mule team to turn around) were the exclusive domain of cars – the intimidating scale threatened pedestrians and disconnected districts from one another. As part of a wide-ranging rehabilitation program designed to revitalize the city, SWA provided planning and design services for the 90-plus northernmost blocks – the most historic part of downtown.

The goal? To reclaim the under-utilized streets for pedestrian, bike, and bus activity, and spur retail, entertainment, and residential development and re-development. To that end, the planners narrowed the streets from four lanes to two; the extra space went to on-street parking and wider sidewalks. The firm also added lighting fixtures, street trees, benches, and public art throughout to create a strong sense of place. But in order to define the distinct sub-districts, the character of these elements varies depending on their location. For example, the Historic District has turn-of-the-century-style lighting and streets laid with unit pavers that recall the neighborhood's original clay bricks. A public art program entitled "Tapping the Aquifer" brings the water that runs beneath the city to the surface, both literally and figuratively, and makes reference to the city's heritage as a bayou-centered shipping town. The collaborations between the artists and urban design team range from the whimsical (fountains that look like exploded manhole covers) to the elegantly understated (limestone water walls accented with bronze leaves). SWA principal (and Texan) Nancy Fleming couldn't be more pleased with the results of their efforts: "Downtown Houston used to roll up its sidewalks at five. But now the streets are noisy and active with life. It's finally become a thriving, 24-hour town."

In the course of this rehabilitation program, Houston's wide roads were narrowed down and on-street parking, sidewalks, street trees and an entire range of urban and street-scape design was introduced. Downtown Houston became recharged with life.







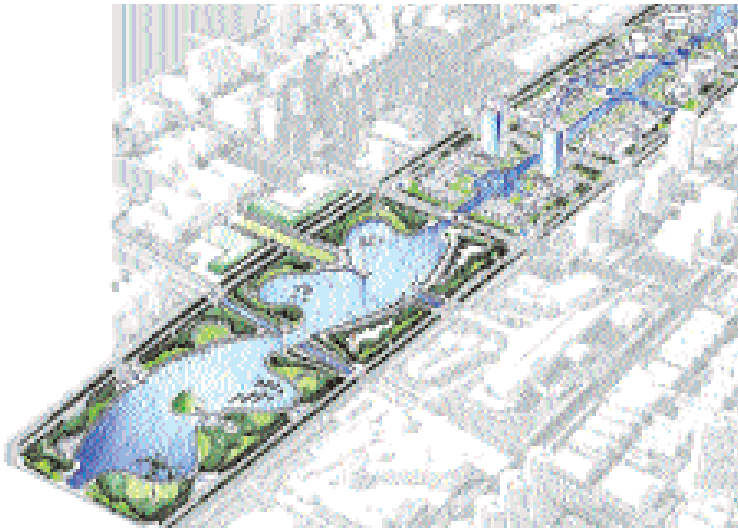
NANHAI CITY CENTER, NANHAI, CHINA

SWA Team: Kevin Shanley, Scott Slaney, Bob Jacob, Geoff Turnbull, Lauren Brown, Sean O'Malley, Lance Lowrey, Scott McCready, Worsak Luangsuwan

Area: 97 hectares

Costs: 35 – 40 million US dollars

Completion: 2002



Nanhai City Center

The birthplace of Cantonese culture and language, Nanhai until now has never had a city center to call its own. That has changed with the urban design master plan for a 97-hectare mixed-use/urban corridor at the heart of the newly established, quickly developing Nanhai city.

Recognizing the important cultural role water plays in the Pearl River delta, SWA created a system of lakes, rivers, and canals that link Lushui Hill in the south to the Foshan River in the north (the layout is ideal in terms of feng shui, notes principal Scott Slaney). This central waterway provides active and passive waterfront for the precincts it passes through, and also has a positive effect on the larger environment, filtering out city-produced pollutants before they reach the Foshan River.

The centerpiece of the project is Nanhai Citizens Plaza. Named for its role as a civic gathering place, it accommodates the hundreds of thousands that assemble for national holidays and serves as a forecourt for the adjacent future city hall. Despite the hot and humid climate, the Chinese make good use of their public open spaces; elderly gather for tai chi in the mornings, and couples dance to portable boomboxes at night. To serve a multitude of uses, Citizens Plaza was designed with a central lawn and wishing wells that record the anonymous comments and suggestions from passersby, and intimate “courtship spaces” shaded by metal arbors. Construction materials were chosen with the particular talents of the region’s craftsmen in mind: stone and metal instead of concrete. By doing extensive research on the region’s indigenous trades and natural resources early in the design process, SWA was able to realize the 35 million-dollar-plus project in a mind-boggling three years.

“It’s remarkable how quickly things get built in China,” acknowledges Slaney. “As planners and designers, the challenge is to develop sound notions that translate quickly to the built environment. Forcing materials and technologies – that’s an uphill battle. Instead, we try to develop planning and design solutions that celebrate the vernacular of a place.”

Nanhai City, the cradle of Cantonese culture, obtained a 100-hectare city center comprising a system of lakes, rivers and canals. Its heart is the Citizens Plaza, a multi-functional gathering place. Stone and metal, rather than concrete, were the favored materials.