

# Walk of the Town

**The RiverWalk** is crowded today, as it is on most sunny days. Downtown Milwaukee's 15-block stretch of sidewalk, patio and green space on both sides of the rolling Milwaukee River brims with strollers, joggers, shoppers and businesspeople on lunch break. • The river tying the walkway together flows silently north to south. It joins the Menomonee River just before the merging waters flow into Milwaukee Harbor and Lake Michigan. A swirl of gulls plays tag high overhead, the screeching muted in the soft breeze. Sleek cabin cruisers rumble upstream, leaving a wake of sparkling reflected sunlight.

At the P re Marquette Park along the RiverWalk, a red-and-white checkered tablecloth blossoms in front of four picnickers. A platter containing spinach quiche, a submarine-sized loaf of crusty Italian bread and bottle of riesling is readied.

Two years ago in the same park, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Bill Clinton met to give major addresses on the increasing importance of German-American business and cultural linkages.

Throughout most of Milwaukee's history, the scene here would have been different. Certainly nobody would be picnicking, much less giving speeches. In the 19th century, the Milwaukee River was a berthing place for sailing ships, but by the turn of the century, when sailing ships were replaced with steamers, the river was largely neglected. The river became so polluted, it wouldn't freeze in the winter. Few showed interest when, in 1904, architect Alfred Clas drew up plans for a walkway along the river.

A citywide development boom in the 1970s changed the perception of the waterway. Interest in a riverwalk grew among the general public. "Hey, if San Antonio can do it, why can't Milwaukee?" became the drumbeat refrain.

Then-Mayor Henry Maier commissioned a study of the river and its banks. Through the city's sewage abatement program, the water slowly became cleaner. Restoration of the river was an issue on which Maier and his successor,



John O. Norquist, could agree. When Norquist took over as mayor in 1988, the river clean-up and a riverwalk design became a priority. Rather than reinvent the wheel, architect Ken Kay resurrected Clas' old vision. He incorporated many of Clas' ideas into the planning, and, in 1994, the RiverWalk finally became a reality.

OFTEN ON PLEASANT days such as this, the mayor jogs south along the RiverWalk on his way home from City Hall. "My favorite place along the RiverWalk is in P re Marquette Park, standing near the Midwest Express gazebo," says Mayor Norquist. "It's the heart of the system."



**FLOWERS AND** spirits bloom at the RiverWalk's John Hawk's Pub (above) as summer returns—an occasion heralded by Milwaukee's annual Riversplash celebration (below).

BY MARTIN HINTZ

The lifeblood of the system is the growing number of businesses that line the RiverWalk. "We expect that the RiverWalk's economic impact will bear itself out over the next 15 to 20 years," says Joe Weirick, a partner in Faison Associates. Faison is the agent for the Milwaukee

RiverWalk District Inc., a private nonprofit association of downtown business owners. To launch the project in 1994, the city contracted with the Business Improvement District No. 15, which in turn contracted with the RiverWalk District as project manager for the development.

The district worked with each property owner along the river to get 99-year public-access easements. The total RiverWalk project in the downtown area cost \$12 million. Of that, between \$500,000 to \$750,000 was made available in direct loans for property owners wishing to con-

struct a wider walkway near their property. Seventy-eight percent of the funding for the RiverWalk came from the city's tax levy, with the remainder paid for by the Business Improvement District. An assessment on the tax bill for the property owners' share is spread over the next 20 years.

Thus far, business owners and citizens alike have enjoyed positive returns on their investment. "People gravitate to the RiverWalk," says Weirick. "So we see a lot of pedestrian traffic, especially at lunchtime. People are drawn to the water." Weirick laughs. "This might be a Pisces thing. After all, didn't we all come from the water?"

Capitalizing on the downtown draw is Milwaukee's Riversplash festival, June 5-7, a 10-block-long celebration. Rock music bounces from the walls of old buildings on both sides of the river. Blues musicians perform on street-corner stages. Shoulder-to-shoulder crowds flow from bratwurst vendor to corn-on-the-cob concession. It is the place to be ... and a place to be seen. The RiverWalk, annually Milwaukee's first festival of the summer season, allows strollers to connect easily with the various

entertainment stations around downtown. There might be a polka band in front of the Pabst Theater, the century-old landmark on the east side of the river. Or, there might be the pounding beat of a reggae band on the west side. Regardless of the musical style, Riversplash allows Milwaukeeans to rejoice over the long-awaited return of summer.

Luckily, Milwaukeean boaters can tie up at several piers along the RiverWalk for the best seating in the house. From there, it's a quick leap up the gangplank for a jaunt to P re Marquette Park, to the Rock Bottom Brewery, the verandah alongside the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts (which hosts Rainbow Summer, a free, outdoor concert each summer weekday at noon) or any of a dozen other tucked-away venues where music ripples through downtown.

When the weather is fine during the "patio season," the verandah of John Hawk's Pub is another highly sought hangout. The restaurant, which recently celebrated its 25th year, is at the prime corner of N. Water Street and E. Wisconsin Avenue. It has been a riverfront fixture since moving there from another downtown site in 1990.

"There was always a commitment to the RiverWalk," says pub manager Nick Piano. The pending extension of the walk was one of the prime reasons restaurant owner Robert W. Bell decided to locate here, Piano says.

The restaurant seats 266 inside and 125 outside. On summer Saturdays, jazz and blues performers hold sway outside from 9 p.m. until closing. A mix of theatergoers, shoppers and businesspeople have made John Hawk's their home, sipping one of the import beers or trying a new wine label. The restaurant is noted for its sandwiches, Friday fish fry and prime rib.

"The RiverWalk has made downtown a destination," Piano affirmed. "Anything that brings excitement to downtown, such as Riversplash, is good for the city."

Historic warehouses and factories are being converted into fashionable residences. Developers Richard Leep, John Raettig, Michael Carnahan, Barry Mandel and others are capitalizing on the movement back to the city center of commute-weary suburbanites, empty nesters and the upwardly mobile.

As an example of the burgeoning entrepreneurship sparking the downtown, part-

ners Leep and Raettig have developed 17 condominiums on the upper three floors of the 101-year-old Cawker Building at 108 W. Wells Street. The structure is one of several the two men have renovated along the RiverWalk. Their 26-unit Galun Tannery condo project was sold out in 90 days, with a waiting list of 200 persons.

"We heard a lot from other real estate pros who doubted our sanity when we first talked about doing these projects," laughs Raettig, who has a master's degree in architecture with an emphasis on historic preservation from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "Our company philosophy is 'follow the market.' And the attraction now is along the river," he adds.

"The RiverWalk is a great idea," says Leep. "There is a lot of charm along the whole walkway, where people can now stroll at their leisure and take in delightful restaurants. This is really a positive factor for Milwaukee."

During the summer of 1998, parts of the RiverWalk will be extended into the Historic Third Ward district, just south of the I-794 freeway leg that aims eastward toward Lake Michigan. The walkway is tied into the \$1.6 million renovation of the Saddlery Building on N. Water Street. Plans for the 102-year-old six-story building include offices, a restaurant and a coffee shop. Six boat slips are incorporated into the plan.

Looking into the future, other RiverWalk segments are scheduled. One more leg of the Third Ward walk is expected to be finalized by 1999. As part of that link, Milwaukee hopes to sell the brick building that once housed the city's fireboat. The historic structure, also on North Water, was built in 1915. One of the stipulations of any sale, according to city development officials, is that the buyer has to construct a RiverWalk leg.

In the next few years, the walkway will extend south to the city's Summerfest exhibition grounds along Lake Michigan and join a state-financed wood-chip trail beyond North Avenue. This connection will allow strollers to ramble all the way into rural Ozaukee County to the north.

"All this puts Milwaukee on the cutting edge of the new urban renaissance," says developer Raettig. "The city is really going in the right direction." **M**

*Martin Hintz, a Milwaukee native, is the author of several travel books.*

