**Mankato’s Best Non-Place**

**By Tony Filipovitch**

There is a nursery rhyme that goes “The other day upon the stair/I met a man who wasn’t there./He wasn’t there again today./I wish, I wish he’d go away.” Any city has its places that aren’t anything yet, places where you can sense what might be except that it’s just not there.

The best of those places in Mankato is the new civic Square that is being created in front of the Intergovernmental Center. Call it a Piazza, Plaza, Square, or Place (with a French accent—“plass”), even though it’s a parking lot right now. As the Hilton Hotel comes up out the ground, you can almost see the plaza that is spreading its shadow. The space is defined by the four buildings facing each other—the Civic Center, and the Intergovernmental Center, the Hilton Hotel and the Graif Building. The buildings are far enough apart that sun can get into the space, but they are tall enough to create a feeling of enclosure. And the daily business in these buildings should generate a fair bit of pedestrian traffic.

There are problems, of course. When the new hotel is finished, there will be two streets running at the edges of the plaza (one in front of the Civic Center, the other in front of the hotel and the parking ramp). But if the intersection with Riverfront is necked down, the streets will take on the character of service access (rather than through traffic) and will not interfere with the free flow of pedestrians. There is a change in elevation from the front door of the IGC to the front door of the hotel—although I can see a series of low walls stepping up the slope and creating convenient nooks and shelves for seating.

But the biggest problem is what is not there now. Successful plazas provide a pleasant microclimate (some sun, protection from wind but open to breezes, at least some trees and planting and some running water—whether a fountain or “creek”), safe and easy passage for pedestrians (if the needs of people and cars conflict, the car is made to adjust, not the people), places to sit and watch the passing parade, and places to attract people so the parade keeps coming. The planting and water can be formal, the way it is often done in Washington, DC, or informal, as it is often done on the west coast (Portland, Oregon, has some great ones, like the Forecourt Fountain or the Salmon Street Springs, both in the downtown area). A safe pedestrian space can be created by restricting (not eliminating) access to Riverfront Drive. Seating can be achieved both by shaping the land and the retaining walls, and by providing street furniture. And the three institutional spaces (the Intergovernmental Center, the Civic Center, and the Hilton Hotel) will provide a steady stream of passers-by.

But what are missing are the attractors, the little shops around the perimeter of the piazza to give the passers-by a reason to tarry awhile. In addition to the first floor of the Graif Building, additional storefronts will be built along the south side, and the open lobby next to the IGC will also turn into shops. The shops will sell coffee (maybe a bakery, too—we need a good pastry shop), and ice cream, maybe chocolates or popcorn. If we build the river overlook across Riverfront Drive, perhaps a kite shop could find its way into the plaza (they could sell yo-yos and penny whistles, too). The newly reborn Mankato Place is near the bike trail, so it could be a good place for a bike shop. Maybe for lunch and early evenings there could be a sidewalk café or two (or three?)—perhaps Bagel Brothers would even come back!

It’s all there, waiting to step out of the shadow cast by the new hotel building. Watch this space!

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