

Vidalia Riverfront Masterplan

SCOTT W. WALL and GROVER MOUTON III
Tulane University

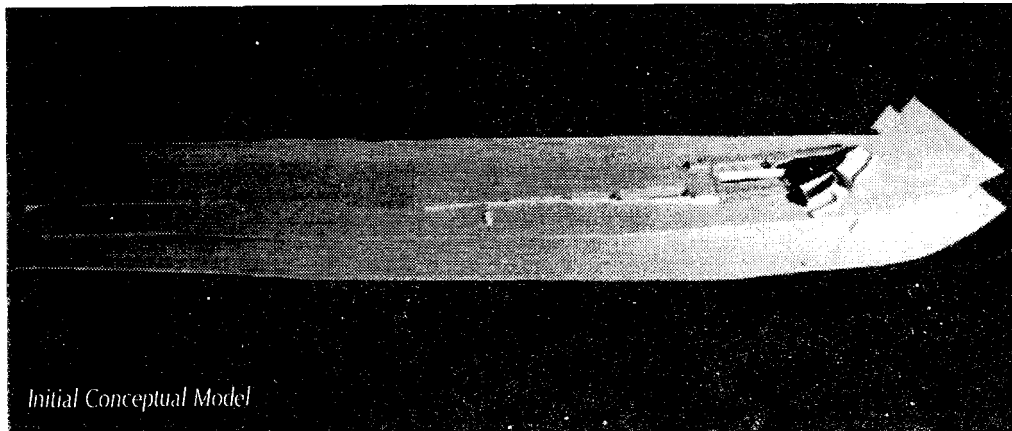
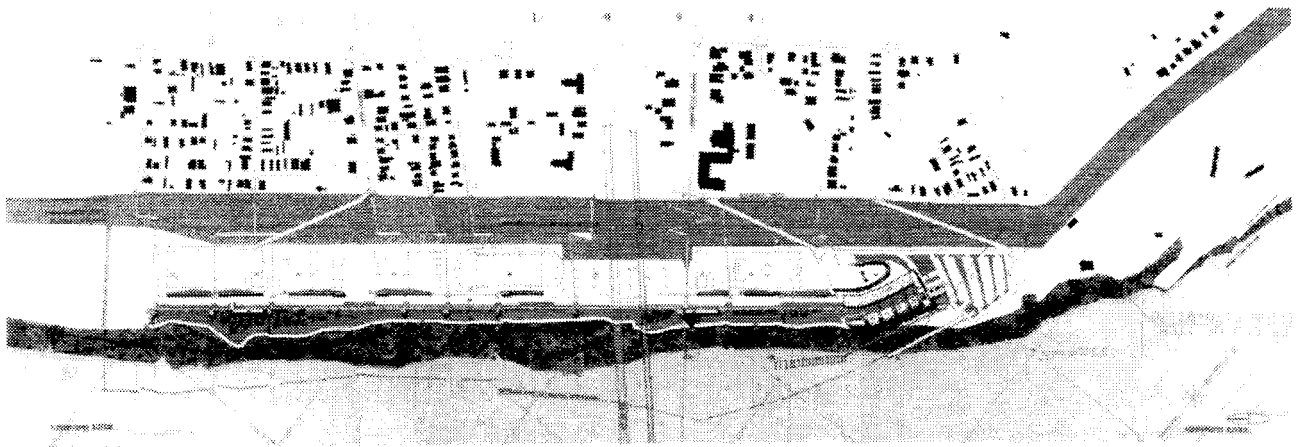
There is nothing quite like the sight of the River at high-water, with barges and tugs vying for their right to your horizon. The edge of the water laps against an industrial landscape of steel sheds, smoke stacks, concrete docks and the temporary mooring points of barge traffic.

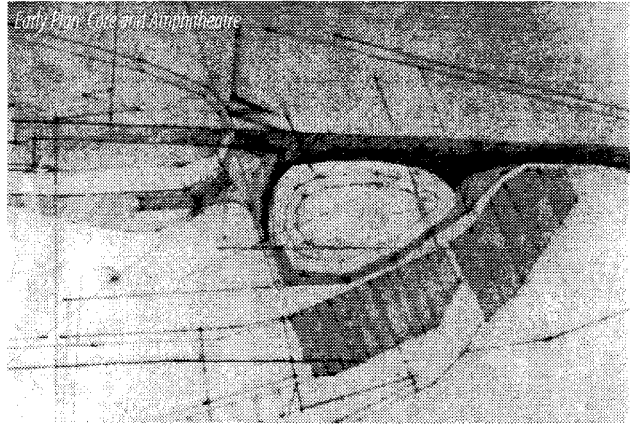
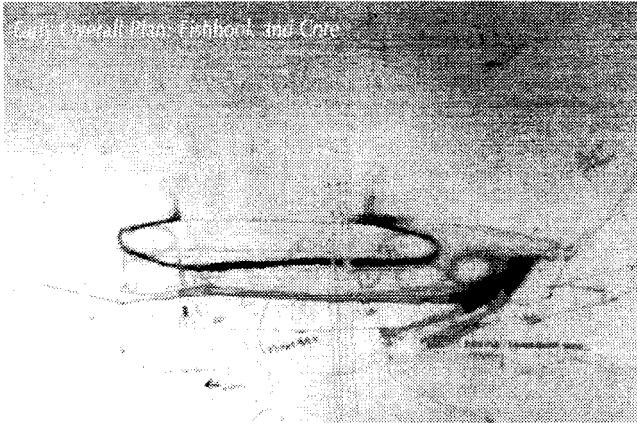
Likewise, low water reveals the flats and gaps in the River's course — the no-man's land of silt and soil, the residue of years of the current's movement. One's place here is as on a precipice, with the swift current rumbling quietly in its manufactured bed.

The town which lay bound to the River with such a precarious hold was a trading town, blue-collar, agricul-

tural rather than cultured, unlike her sister city, Natchez, on the safe green bluffs across the way. The old nineteenth and early twentieth century river town of Vidalia, Louisiana, was typical of many along the course of the Mississippi River. It was a rough patchwork grid of simple, lowslung buildings laid out according to the curving, rising and falling course of the River. The levee and the town were virtually contiguous extensions of the River itself, open to the whim of changing courses, new oxbows and old billabongs.

The long horizontality of the old town and its protective levee has vanished, either demolished by the Corps of





Engineers, its houses and artifacts moved by desperate families, or its buildings of significance swallowed by the quietly voracious alterations in the course of the River.

In its place the raised flat of a 600 foot wide tabula rasa of concrete tailings bound on one side by the Mississippi River itself, and on the other by the man-made earth work of the flood control levee, rising twelve feet above the plain.

The new city of Vidalia rests on what was once fertile farm land, inside the earthwork of a new levee. The original residential grid and town center laid out by the Corps of Engineers in 1939 has slowly taken on the characteristics of most post-war urbanism, with the princi-

pal street and commercial strip effectively dividing the new city into two halves.

The levee separates city from River, denying the traditional relationship of river town to river, and hence to center. The modern urban "strip" separates the new city from itself, denying the conventional reading of any normative civic center. The city's desire to reoccupy this open, but remembered urban ground is significant as a predominantly public undertaking which attempts to recenter the town without another physical dislocation: to occupy the ghost of that city without looking nostalgically at the past, but rather forward into the future.

