

## Park + Ride: A Story of Confusion, Fear, Triumph and Ultimately . . . Guilt

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The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA or more common: “ice tea”) has been a famously lauded and vilified piece of federal legislation. It has made available over a *hundred billion dollars* in funding to projects throughout the nation, the primary focus of which has been improving infrastructure for motor vehicles.<sup>1</sup> Politicians, Engineers and Urban Planning Departments schemed for control of this money, with a keen eye to making sure they got their share regardless of the merit of the project. Keep in mind this was 155 billion dollars over 6 years to be doled out, and it was taxpayer’s money. Not going after your fair (or more) share was political suicide, every state and local municipality *needed* to come up with a big money infrastructure project – and quick! This jockeying for position turned many a straightforward city engineer or local transit authority leader into calculating, manipulating competitors in a race to come up with the best story. I’m not intending to go over this well trodden path solely as an academic exercise, rather I’m seeking clarity of my own role in one of these projects. I’ve seen first hand the machinations involved in bringing an ISTEA project to fruition and have been rewarded for my role as the project architect for 20 million dollars worth of these funds, including receiving a National AIA Design Honor Award. Five years of effort went into this project from planning through construction. This is the story of the Center Street Park and Ride in Des Moines, Iowa.

In 1994 the Des Moines Metropolitan Transportation Authority, better known as the MTA, produced a request for proposals to design an Intermodal Transportation Facility. The project program included a large parking garage, a bus loading station for a downtown bus loop and a daycare facility. The MTA’s interest was solely in the bus loop, the smallest component of the project, but they were the conduit for the federal money so they were the client. My firm had recently completed a large parking garage project so we decided to prepare a proposal. We were awarded the project and instructed to begin immediately.

Now a project architect needed to be selected and I was determined to be the most suitable choice. The logic of this choice escapes me to this day, I had never lead a project over a million dollars and was not involved in the first parking garage project or any garage project for that matter, however I was pleased at the opportunity.

It became immediately apparent that the biggest issue in the design was going to be the garage. Eighteen hundred cars was the number finally presented on a site 260 feet by 600 feet (1 city block wide by 2 blocks long), added were a daycare for 100 children and a loading/waiting area for 4 city buses. We were quite a distance at this point from being able to understand the implications of the project size, let alone how the budget would work. We did now know that, short of the cost of a few buses, we had twenty million dollars to work with. Projections from our parking consultants were for 600,000 square feet of parking deck. 600,000 square feet? This would cover the entire site four stories tall, which of course was our consultant’s recommendation due to the economy of repetition and the ability to make shorter stairs and elevators. Our greatest fear was to fill the entire site with garage, but we were unaware at the time of the strategy we would construct to sell our civic agenda to all parties involved. And the number and agendas of all parties involved were vast, complicated, and often in direct heated conflict with each other.

The first job meetings commenced with a somewhat civil building committee. The head of the MTA presided as the primary client contact, but shared what he imagined was some decision making power with a large insurance company. They were involved due to a deal struck between the MTA and the insurance company, which was the lease of 90% of the spaces in the garage to this group. Thus began a pattern of ethical conundrums that I will begin to outline here.

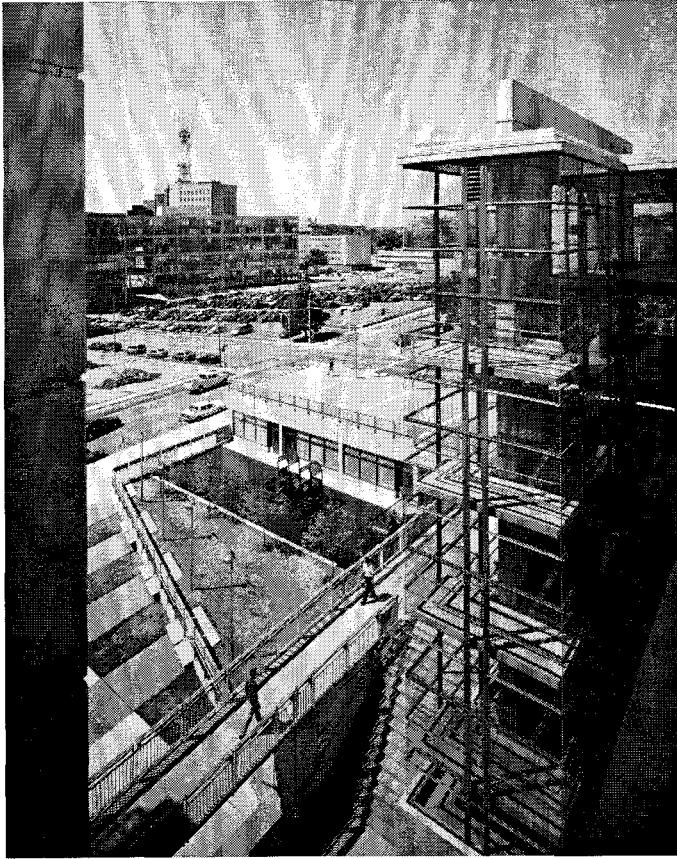


Fig. 1. View of insurance company from park + ride.

The first stated challenge listed in the final ISTEA bill proposal is Safety. Following Safety are Travel Growth, Environment and Demographic Changes.<sup>2</sup> In receiving funding for an Intermodal Transportation Facility the purpose is to address all of these issues by creating facilities that gather drivers before they engage main arterial roadways, shift them to public transportation and shuttle them to urban cores. This is the basic formula for any park & ride; less highway traffic is safer, more environmentally sensitive, creates less congestion on roadways and reduces parking loads within downtown areas. Our ever-developing concern was that this project was just a few blocks north of the downtown core and one block away from the campus of the insurance company. (Figs. 1&2) Calling this a park and ride was a fallacy; it was simply a downtown garage. We took some solace in the fact that we may be reducing downtown traffic, but it was somewhat clear that within our lifespan the downtown would completely envelop the proposed site. Added to our concern was that the bus route would be useless, because even in the sometimes harsh winter environment of Des Moines no one was going to wait for a bus rather than walk one block. We apparently had some reason for our ethical concerns when the MTA requested that our meeting minutes not reflect the specifics of the lease arrangement. Moving ahead we wondered to what degree we might become entangled in some serious trouble.

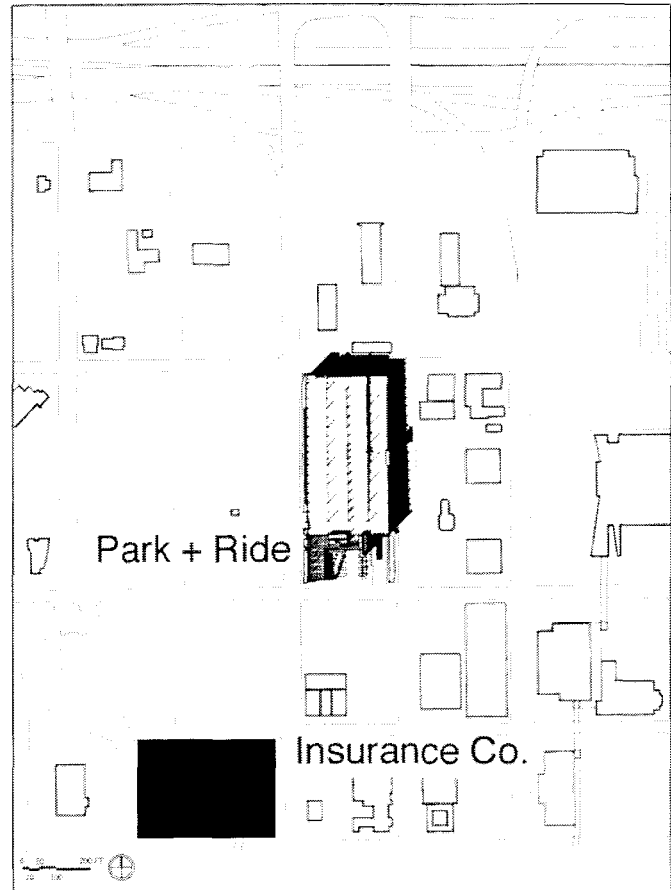


Fig. 2. Site Plan.

Early in the schematic design process we received a gift from the convoluted, Byzantine process by which federally funded projects go forward. Any federally funded building project is subject to an archaeological review to determine if any significant artifacts are present. State historical societies keep an eye out for these projects because they can mean big money and the level of scrutiny of the value of the artifacts is low, no one else is knowledgeable enough to question their judgment. An application was made to do some research on the site. Much to no ones surprise something significant was indeed found, a turn of the century brewery had existed on the southern end of the site but was closed during prohibition and buried by subsequent development. While only foundation fragments existed from the original buildings an archaeological team descended to unearth this valuable historical information. There was no restriction to the time or funding available for this process, but we were assured that it would be completed within 6 months. Our dismay at this turn of events changed quickly to elation upon reflection. Now we had the perfect reason to not build a garage on the southern end of the site, it could remain open as a public pedestrian plaza facing downtown. The news that we would need to fastrack the foundations to keep the project moving caused no pain, it only reinforced our reasoning not to wait for the dig to be complete, we would just work around it "and, by the way, we think maybe a plaza would be

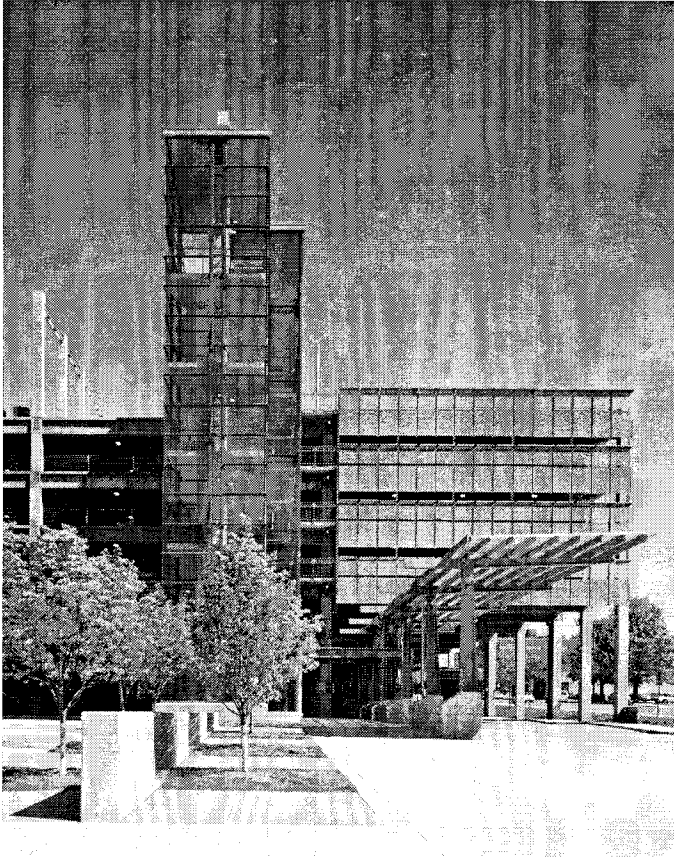


Fig. 3. Plaza view.

wise at the southern end of the project to accommodate pedestrian circulation.” Our site area battle was won easily. (Fig. 3)

Every architect understands that projects get done with multiple agendas that need to be crafted together. Different stories are told to everyone depending on their interests and all of the stories must lead to the same outcome. We were beginning to get our stories together, but the list of agendas to keep straight was expanding. The City Planning Department, City Engineering Department, Parking and Transportation Department, Downtown Business Partnership, Federal Transportation Authority (FTA) and state politicians were now added to our original group of the MTA, the insurance company and our own parking consultant. All were attending meetings and all were making specific requests that needed to be addressed. The most powerful member of this group, of course, turned out to be the insurance company. Not only were their facilities engineers attending the meetings, but also their legal representatives. One lawyer in particular brought a presence that withered all others in attendance; a highly skilled negotiator, she held all of the cards—they were renting almost all of the spaces so they represented almost all of the future income for the project. In terms of defining whom the project served and which agenda would bend all others, it was clear we would follow their

desires. While at this point we were having some significant concerns about the overall usefulness of the program and ethics of the use of ISTEA funding, the project was turning out to be very interesting. The design opportunity was arguably the best in the office and possibly a truly good piece of architecture, something to propel the office further into the national spotlight. In addition it was making money, the fee was under control and in all likelihood another design firm would not place as much care into this ungainly thing covering two city blocks in our hometown, something within view of my own drafting table. (Fig. 4) We were committed to staying with the project and being proud of our contribution, we would figure out how to serve everyone including ourselves. The eventual truth seems closer to having selected the lesser of evils.

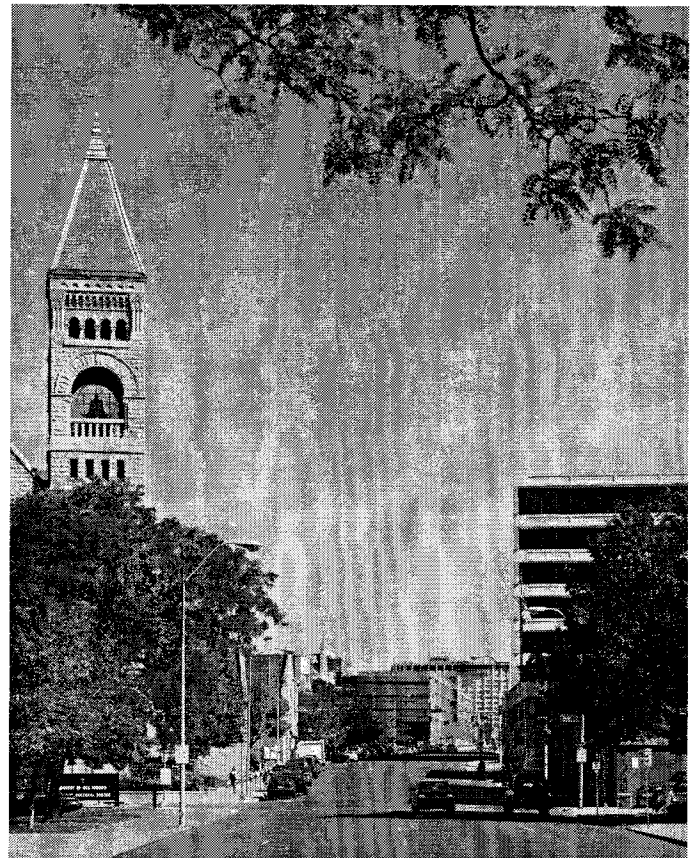


Fig. 4. View from downtown.

After moving through schematic design and into development we received our first real cost estimates back. Here we made a significant discovery about how cast in place concrete parking garages work. This is vaguely reminiscent of Yogi Berra’s “90% of baseball is half pitching.” Eighty percent of the total cost of the project was in concrete, and 50% of the concrete was underground as cased augured pilings. Some quick calculations will give you the picture: 80% of an \$18,000,000 estimated cost equals \$14,400,000 in concrete. All other components, such as electrical, mechanical, site work, elevators, etc. had to come from the remaining \$3,600,000. Now 3.6 million is no small

amount of money, but it was spread over 600,000 square feet, amounting to six dollars per square foot. That's not good even when most of the project is unfinished space. On the other hand we knew the challenge and it wasn't coming from removing dollars out of the stair and cladding budget. Every dollar per square foot savings on the concrete equaled an extra \$600,000 to be used elsewhere or to reduce the budget. As it turns out our final estimates came in almost a million dollars under budget and our architectural goals were intact. That was one of our triumphs. We did it by simplifying the overall structure to its most basic form, a repetitive box. All of the service elements were pulled outside of the box; stairs, elevators, daycare and most of the bus station were moved outside the core structure. This structure was then relentlessly repeated with as few odd conditions as possible, all bays were cast the same and all column and foundation loading was kept equal. The savings using this approach were dramatic and left more than enough money to elaborate the service elements. This approach left us tremendous leeway in developing our stories for the many clients. Pulling the stairs out and cladding them in all glass was a passive safety strategy to the City Engineering staff, a civic beacon to the Downtown Partnership, a bold advertising move for the MTA, and a significant cost savings move to the FTA. The stories go on, but as long as it looked good and stayed below budget everyone was pleased. We were given unbelievable freedom to use different approaches for almost every aspect of the project. We created custom perforation patterns in custom stainless steel cladding panels, invented a steel window system curtain wall that went far beyond what had ever been done before, created custom lights, custom fabricated slate and steel fence panels, custom elevator cabs and large scale custom signage and display systems. We even made a custom 40 foot tall internally illuminated stainless steel entry sign with the letters P-A-R-K 8 feet tall each, and this was for a garage that was 90% pre-leased to a fixed user group who would have no trouble finding their garage. (Fig. 5) At a million dollars under budget no one seemed to pay much attention, and we were determined to make a responsible urban gesture in spite of the user group if need be.

The users did pay attention, however, in matters concerning their own agendas. The most striking example came about during discussions of the egress tower designs. It was determined rather early that the insurance company would require their parking to be physically separated from the other parking. No person could pass from the public to the private side of the project. This division created the need for separate means of egress from each side, even though the load could have been handled easily with less stairs and elevators. The insurance company's further security concerns also required the two sets of elevator/stair towers to be separated from one another, to prevent outsiders from passing into their secure area while one of their employees was leaving. The greatly feared *outsiders* were just employees of some other downtown firm, posing no threat whatsoever, but we decided to save our battles. The

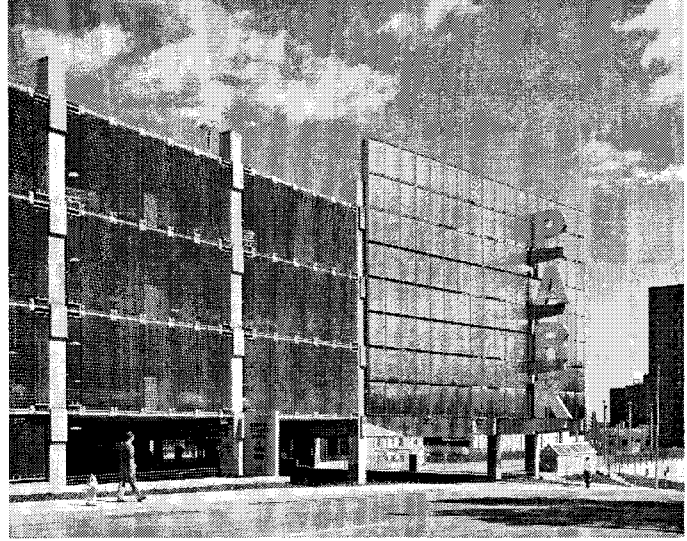


Fig. 5. Entry sign with 8' tall letters.

public egress tower exited into the bus station and it was our plan to exit the insurance tower on the street corner closest to their corporate campus. This in our minds solved the problem and placed users where they needed to be. All parties agreed to this solution in a meeting and we were pleased to be moving rapidly into construction documents. After the meeting the insurance company lawyer pulled us aside and assured us this was the best solution because "Not one of our people will ever ride one of those *fucking* buses." We had assumed the same thing and thought the MTA had projected their required bus traffic based on the small public component parking at the garage. This seemed logical due to the fact that the MTA *had* created the leasing deal knowing the one block proximity to the insurance company's campus. Logic immediately departed when the head of the MTA pulled us aside demanding that the insurance egress tower be moved directly adjacent to the bus station. We reiterated our logic for the choice and related the insurance lawyers claim of not really needing the bus system. The MTA's reply was somewhat firm and memorable "I don't care if we have to ram those buses straight up their asses, they *will* ride the bus." With our confidence in the logic of this whole arrangement shattered, we proceeded in fine (and fatally flawed) modernist fashion to try to solve the problem architecturally. We shifted the two towers into an arrangement that benefited neither user group perfectly, but seemed to fit the logic presented to us. Considering the jam the whole project was in at this point, we're very lucky about what happened next.

While it didn't seem lucky at the time, the project died. Two years into the process we completed construction documents and put the project out to bid in the fall of 1996. At the request of the MTA we had advertised the project bid documents regionally, trying to get more contractors involved in order to make the prices more competitive. We were already operating with estimates at almost a million below our budget, but contractors were busy and less likely to be extremely competi-

tive. The results of our efforts were dramatic: we had hundreds of requests from contractors and subs alike for drawings, almost 200 copies of a massive set of documents were sent out. We answered hundreds of questions for six weeks solid; almost a hundred sheets of addenda were issued before the bid date. When the day finally arrived we received word that the project was being hailed as the “concrete job of the century” in Des Moines. Seven general contractors submitted bids, which included three locals with the rest agreeing to relocate significant full time staff to run the project on site. As the bids were read it became apparent that we had far exceeded our budgeting goals, all bids were well under the budget with the low bid coming in at 1.8 million dollars under budget. The strategy of getting more bids, however, had an unfortunate consequence for the project. The low bid was from a contractor out of Minnesota, our fair neighbor to the north. The problem was not the out of state contractor, although surely it rubbed many the wrong way to send some of our cut of the federal ISTEA money northward. The problem was that the contractor, a large group out of the Minneapolis area, was a subsidiary of a Canadian company. They were also not a union affiliated contractor so they could use whatever subcontractors they wanted to. Each of these discoveries dropped a bomb on the project, the first coming from union protestors picketing the site and making much ballyhoo in the local news. The far more significant issue was the Canadian ownership. Iowa had fought to get their taxpayer ISTEA money back and they not only lost it to another state, *it was going to another country!* Now national politics were involved and without explanation all bids were rejected on the project. The project was on indefinite hold. The federal government then rescinded the funding in a budget cut and it was over. The Canadian group threatened court action, but realistically without a project going forward there was nothing to sue for. We were somewhat dumbfounded, myself in particular due to the vast amount of personal effort invested in wading through the minefields up to this point, but it was simply on to the next project.

Without our knowledge the project crept along, remaining well out of sight, but it was continually being re-formed and re-packaged. The FTA apparently realized the MTA was ill suited to handle the project, so it was re-allocated to the City of Des Moines. The insurance group was stripped away as an obvious conflict of interest and a new story was told about the need to open the urban core for business development with parking moved to the edge of downtown in a “ring of services.”<sup>73</sup> This approach was simply stupid and nearsighted. Downtown growth would not only overtake this one site, but now be surrounded by a service ring effectively retarding growth. Regardless, the new project was ordained part of the new “Urban Plan” and sent back to the FTA to secure new ISTEA funding. The FTA, now in full knowledge of the project logic or lack thereof, immediately approved the money.

To our surprise, after a year of nothing, the project was back. It would now be split in half with 900 users on each side; the

same insurance company would be renting half of the project, but were not involved as an owner. The next set of bids came back still 1.8 million below budget; curiously the Canadian group was not one of the bidders. Maybe that was curious only for us because no one from the owner group seemed even concerned that they would bid. The following two years were spent in a dizzying crunch of construction administration. We lavished attention on the construction process, creating huge headaches for the contractors who couldn’t really understand why we would care precisely what the details looked like on a parking garage. (Fig. 6) The Des Moines Register began referring to the project as the “Taj Mahal of parking garages” alternately interested then panning the project for wasted effort. We continued undaunted, we had a social agenda; they couldn’t understand we were doing this for their own good, for the good of society. We had the added benefit of being below the average budget per car for garages of this size, so it was tough to criticize.

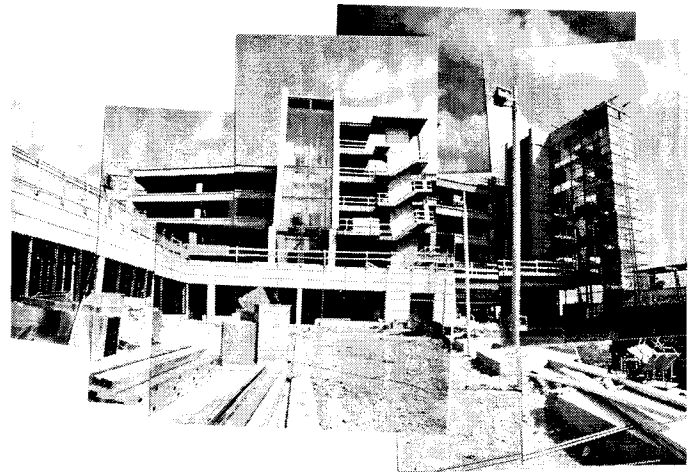


Fig. 6. Construction at the south plaza.

While an architecture student, I recall being told by faculty that there was no feeling like seeing something you had designed being built. Either this was a cruel and sadistic twist on reality or not the voice of experience. While it’s true there is no feeling like it, the feeling is utter and overwhelming dread. I had been through the process many times before but never at this magnitude. Every single day held the potential for million dollar mistakes, any missed detail could ruin years of effort. As the project designer and construction administrator every waking minute was spent averting total disaster. Occasionally my head was above water long enough to appreciate that the project might be good, but that only meant the struggle was that much more critical. The project was nearing completion in the early spring of 1999, and it was indeed better than expected. The clients were unhappy, the city was unhappy and generally people had no idea what to think of it. Then the national critics started to take notice.



Within a year the project had won an Iowa AIA Design Honor Award, Central States Region AIA Honor Award, US Dept of Transportation National Design Award, Concrete Institute/*Architecture* magazine Design Award, Iowa Concrete Association Excellence Award and a National AIA Design Honor Award. It was also published in numerous journals including the *Iowa Architect*, *Architecture* magazine and *Architectural Record*. The fact that it had come in so far under budget and was functioning well, along with the positive recognition meant that everyone now liked the project. That is, almost everyone.

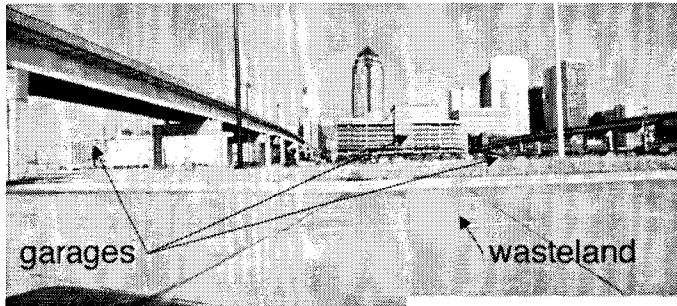


Fig. 7. View of the southern downtown edge.

Ultimately, critics cannot bestow a true measure of greatness. Possibly at some point in the distant future the success or failure of this project can be more reasonably assessed. For now it operates as it was designed, it is fully leased, the buses carry enough passengers around the six block loop to continue operating and it sits outside the edge of the downtown core. It does not solve any of the problems chartered by the ISTEA act, and has created proposals for two additional federally funded garages at the edge of the downtown area. The noose tightens around downtown Des Moines with a “ring of services” approach that creates a wall of parking garages around the urban core. This project represents a successful catalyst for furthering the goal of walling off the downtown, already evident in recently completed projects pushed toward this model by city planners. (Fig. 7) The goal of this project from the original client, the Des Moines Metropolitan Transit Authority, was never to meet any perceived need. The goal was simply to invent a need in order to get money to build a project. Rather than serving the agenda of a powerful patron, the project exists only to have “recovered” taxpayer’s funds. Without this project a private garage would have been built, likely on the same site, and city buses already traveled past the site. It would only have taken adding an additional bus stop sign next to the private



Fig. 8. Des Moines bus stop.

garage to have achieved the same net “urban plan” effect. So we’re left with a 20 million dollar, award winning, 5 year long project that achieves the same lofty goal as a 50 dollar sign.

Money in architecture does not always serve the interests of power, sometimes it simply serves itself. There was no moneyed agenda that the artistic endeavors of this project served, it only needed to exist so that money could be spent on it. It exists well, if the critics are to be believed, but it’s difficult now, looking back at the result to feel great pride in the accomplishment. Most disturbing is the realization that I don’t know what I would do differently if confronted with the same situation again; there is no pithy conclusion, instead just a confession veiled as a success story.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 102nd Congress of the USA, “Intermodal Surface Transportation Act of 1991 (ISTEA),” *H.R. 2950*, (Jan.3, 1991): 8.
- <sup>2</sup> US Government Affairs Office, “ISTEA Reauthorization Policy Statement and Principles,” (1997): 2-3.
- <sup>3</sup> Des Moines Metropolitan Planning Organization, “City of Des Moines Parking Planning Activities,” (2000): 1-2.