

chapter 2

CONTEXTS

NEW RIVER MASTER PLAN REPORT

CONTEXTS

AN OVERVIEW

Analysis of the Riverwalk District should consider the area in its broader context. The previous chapter discussed the more immediate influence of recent planning initiatives (Downtown Master Plan and Master Plan Update); these documents contain an overview of regional, economic, demographic, and physical contexts. This chapter looks into the following five areas of influence, more specific to the New River area:

- **History and Context**
- **National, Regional and Local Identity**
- **Strengths**
- **Challenges**

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

WATERFRONT HERITAGE

Fort Lauderdale development began along the banks of the New River. Tequesta, and later, Seminole native populations were drawn to the river. Planters and settlers followed, along with the construction of forts along the river, and, hence, the city's name. A small village emerged, anchored by Stranahan's trading post and ferry crossing and was then transformed by the arrival of Flagler's East Coast Railway in 1896. Incorporated as a city in 1911 and established as the county seat of Broward in 1915, Fort Lauderdale's population continued to increase with population booms in the 1920's and post-WWII. The city's historic connection to the water was intensified, first, by the dredging of marshland to create a system of canals and reclaimed land for building, spawning the nickname "Venice of America"; and, later, by the wave of beachfront development and tourism. The New York landscape architect and city planner Richard Schermerhorn Jr. prepared a comprehensive city plan (1926) which established both the pattern of the future developments and the seeds for a public riverfront park and promenade (see p. 2.28).

During the past decade, Fort Lauderdale has witnessed another real estate boom with an influx of residential developments Downtown, especially along the one-mile stretch of New River within the downtown area.



1926-1936: early development focused around railway and station; Stranahan Park as "town square"



1937-1945: shows clear Las Olas Blvd., shift as it stretches from beach to its "dead-end" downtown near the river



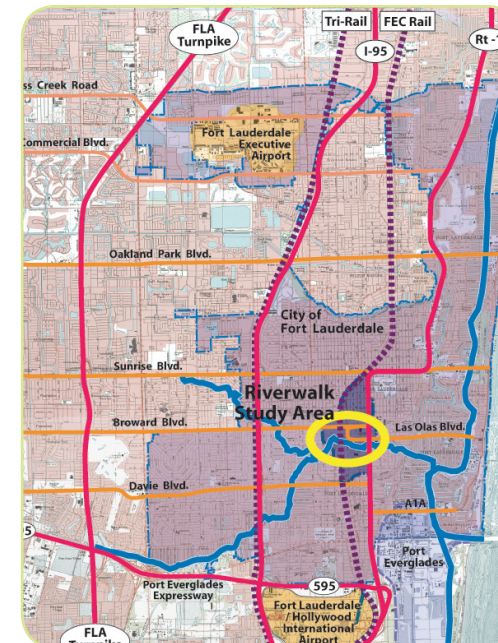
1940-1945: shows higher density development shifting eastward



1945-1950: shows the importance of the "working" river edge to the life of the city

REGIONAL ACCESS AND TRANSPORTATION

Downtown Fort Lauderdale and the Riverwalk are regionally connected through Interstate highways, the nearby international airport, two north-south rail systems, a major port, a gridded street network and expansive waterways.



Fort Lauderdale Downtown (RAC) shown in dark purple; City of Fort Lauderdale boundary shown in light purple; regional transportation connections; and New River district shown within yellow circle. (Base map image from US geologic survey)

New River District's proximity to waterways and Fort Lauderdale Beach



Today's Riverwalk

NATIONAL, REGIONAL & LOCAL IDENTITY

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL IDENTITY

Today's Fort Lauderdale is a nationally known destination, with two primary aspects that contribute most to its national and regional identities:

- **Beaches, boats & waterways:** Fort Lauderdale is famous for its beaches, which drive a major portion of the tourism industry for decades. Fort Lauderdale is also a major boating center, with a vibrant boating industry that encompasses manufacturing, sales, and maintenance. With its expansive waterway system, the city is a popular yachting vacation stop, and home port for a wide range of boaters.



- **Las Olas:** Las Olas Boulevard is the gateway to downtown Fort Lauderdale from the east. With its walkable, human scaled streetscapes filled with boutiques, eateries, antique shops, restaurants and clubs, it is a major destination for visitors and locals.

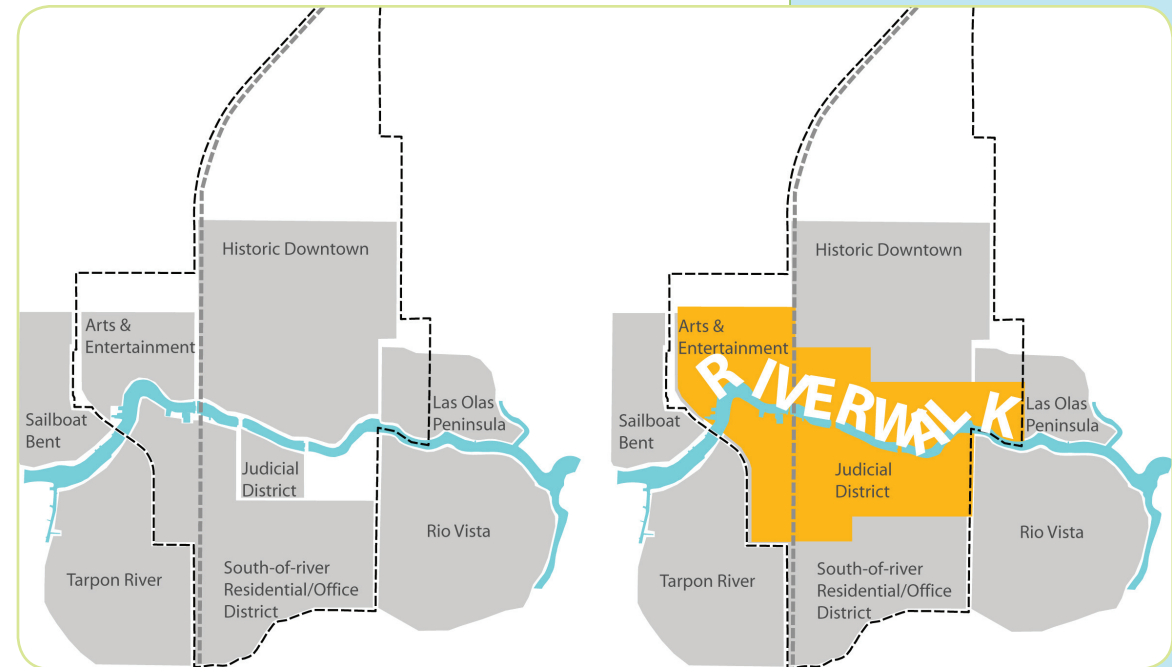


LOCAL IDENTITY

The Riverwalk is the major Downtown public open space. Despite its central location and proximity to major institutions and destinations, the Riverwalk has not yet transcended its local recognition to the level of a major, national destination. While many of the necessary ingredients are in place - water-views, proximity to boating, programmed events and festivals - the Riverwalk experience as a whole, and the opportunities created by the years of hard work and investment, have not yet been fully realized.



Existing Riverwalk



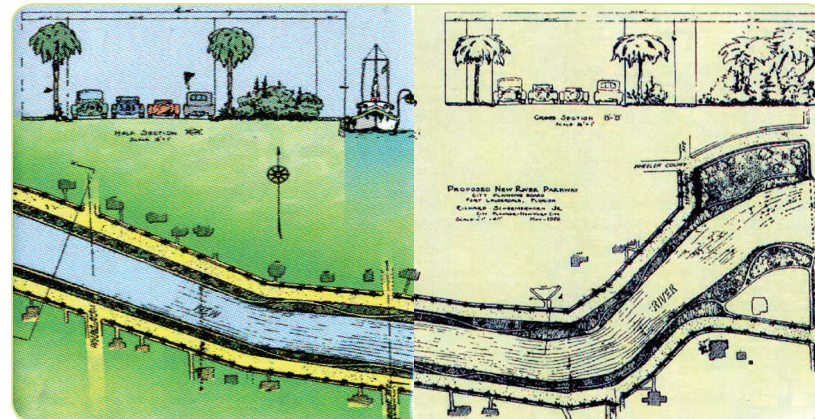
Existing: New River as a barrier

Proposed: Riverwalk district as a connector

STRENGTHS

BUILD UPON HISTORY AND PREVIOUS RIVERWALK INVESTMENT

Prior to the 20th century, Fort Lauderdale was known as the "New River Settlement". Schermerhorn's 1926 plan, shown below, continued the river-oriented focus of the city's earliest years, including street-river sections and street-block layouts that anticipated the importance of a publicly accessible, park-like riverfront, with streets and lush promenades along both sides of the water and easy-to-cross bridges. With a reinvigorated effort beginning in the 1970's, the river has once again re-emerged as a potential center of community life, where living, working, and recreation will coexist in and around Downtown's most important geographic feature. Public and private investment, vision, and hard work over the past few decades have set the stage for a spectacular and unique public space that builds upon its many valuable layers.



1926 riverfront plan by Richard Schermerhorn, Jr.

BUILD UPON DOWNTOWN MASTER PLAN AND MASTER PLAN UPDATE

Described in more detail in Chapter 1, the Downtown Master Plan (2003) and Master Plan Update (2007) make multiple references to the central role of the New River and give substantial guidance for further refinement. Since their adoption, the two documents have had significant, positive effects on the dialogue surrounding public and private initiatives in Downtown, encouraging a new generation of development and public spaces that work together towards a mixed-use, livable Downtown.



The Master Plan (2003) Framework chapter includes many Goals and Actions that make specific reference to the New River area



A historical photo of Andrews Avenue Bridge, showing that the bridge was once at grade level allowing convenient pedestrian crossing



Recent Riverwalk development allows physical access and activities engagement with water at some segments of New River

CHALLENGES

DISCONTINUITY ALONG RIVER:

Stretches of Riverwalk lack public access, preventing a continuous pedestrian 'loop' encompassing both sides of the river. It is possible, with creative solutions, for active maritime-industry uses and public access to co-exist.



Stretches of Riverwalk without public access

Fences, barriers, and un-welcoming signage in some locations discourage activity and the perception of 'public' access.



Physical barriers restrict public access

POOR CONNECTIONS:

Discontinuous sidewalks, blocked sight-lines, and inactive ground floors discourage pedestrian activity in several locations.



Poor connections to the water from streets leading to the water

Elevated bridges with long ramps, small sidewalks, and inconvenient landing locations discourage pedestrians from crossing the river.



River crossings are inconvenient & unattractive

CHALLENGES

INTEGRATION OF LANDSIDE PARKS AND ACTIVE WATERWAYS:

Given the importance and value of boating along the New River, large boats should be accommodated in locations that do not detract significantly from the public-space experience at landside parks and plazas.

INCOMPATIBLE USES:

Incompatible uses along the river detract from the pedestrian experience and create gaps of inactivity.



Balance and compatibility between marine uses and public park system



Driveways and drop-offs at the expense of pedestrian experience



Parking garages and other incompatible uses face the river

CHALLENGES

DESIGN:

Extensive paved areas, inconsistent landscape elements, a varying palette of materials, and areas devoid of lush planting and shade trees contribute to a fragmented Riverwalk experience.



Examples of inconsistent landscape elements along the river

PLANNED EVENT VS. DAILY-LIFE ACTIVITY:

Major existing public spaces along the river are designed primarily for large-scale planned events. While these spaces function well for programmed activities on a limited number of days per year, they are less successful spaces for daily living. The public space system needs to accommodate both types of events for year-round activity.

Some examples of successful events along the river:

- Sunday Jazz Brunch (13 years)
- Las Olas Art Festival
- Riverwalk Blues & Music Festival (20 Years)
- Promenade in the Park



