On a gray February afternoon the winter winds glide off the frozen water and sweep past the squat, silent building with the blue roof crouched low on the banks of the river. Diffused light bleeds through the dusty transparent walls and descends upon fading awnings and broken and scattered tiles. Leaves and papers rise and fall as eddies of cold air dance in front of the elegant archway constructed of iron spot brick. Within the alcove of the arch, iron and steel have been carefully twisted and tamed into a green painted crest emblazoned with the word “Portside.” Nobody walks by. Except for the wind there is silence.

When Portside was built it was billed as the symbol, some saysavior, of Toledo. When the symbol of your city lies vacant questions have to be asked... and answered. This article is meant to provide some guidance, some hint as to the “how’s” and “why’s” of the Portside saga.

Water has always been a source of intrigue, fascination, and life. Living near the water has always been important for very practical reasons such as thirst, hygiene, and irrigation. In some contemporary American cities, water’s aesthetic attributes have overtaken the practical and have had a profound influence on urban design and downtown revitalization. This is probably no more clearly the case than in Toledo, Ohio. Toledo, a city of approximately 350,000, is the center of commerce, government, and culture for a trading area of nearly 1,000,000 at the western extreme of Lake Erie. Toledo was founded in 1837 and has a rich history, first as a trading post and, more recently, a world port and transportation hub. As is true with many older industrial cities, Toledo has well-financed and surprisingly significant cultural institutions such as the University of Toledo, Toledo Zoo, and renowned Toledo Museum of Art. Curiously, these entities of themselves have not been sufficient to dispel a persistent and annoying lack of civic pride. Toledo seems to lack an identity, a sense of uniqueness and worth. None of the three cultural “anchors” of Toledo are located downtown. This has had an effect on Toledo’s central business district, preventing it from serving as a source of the collective civic image.

Without the cultural base of the “Big Three,” or other institutions such as a major hospital, downtown Toledo lacked the relevance and activity to attract and retain the interest of the largely blue-collar Toledo work force. As the county seat and largest city in the area, it has retained its preeminence as a governmental and financial center.

In the 1950s, Toledo’s downtown started to suffer a decline in retail activity as a result of newly emerging shopping centers and strip commercial development. The city government and downtown business leaders perceived a need to act, to change the downtown to meet these emerging challenges. In the late 1950s, downtown master planning began to take on added importance and new master plans were developed to underpin the remaining department stores and offices. Because most of downtown’s primary tenants were located in the interior, these plans concentrated on the core, largely ignoring the still-industrialized riverfront.

Riverfront Development

Toledo is located along the banks of the Maumee River, the largest tributary to flow into the Great Lakes. Historically, Toledo’s industrial base was concentrated along the river. Riverfront location became less critical to commerce after the turn-of-the-century, when highways and railways began to offer cheaper and more

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efficient transport than waterways. By the 1950s, the Maumee Riverfront was still an important, if declining, player in the local economy, serving as a center of warehousing, cargo transfer, and inexpensive retail. Those creating the downtown master plan found it easy to discount the importance of the riverfront as a component of their downtown revitalization strategy.

In the 1960s, the Maumee Riverfront was chosen as the location for a downtown expressway, the Downtown Distributor, because its land was flat and relatively inexpensive. Plans for the riverfront expressway were finally dropped in 1973, due to a lack of Federal funding and the failure of local government to take action on the proposal. Jumping on the chance presented by this major change in highway planning, in 1975 the City of Toledo released Toledo Looks To The River, a comprehensive study of the entire Toledo riverfront. The plan proposed a public park along the downtown waterfront and a series of riverfront parks linked by bikeways and paths among new and existing residential, commercial and industrial sites. The study served as a milestone in the creation of a sensitive new public policy regarding development along the Maumee River.

The Port of Toledo was, and still is, a dominant user of the waterfront and has a policy of promoting the industrialization of the waterfront. Fortunately, the Port concentrated away from downtown, on the Foreign Trade Zone near Maumee Bay. This allowed visionary city officials like Richard Boers, Commissioner of Forestry and Open Space Planning, to undertake an aggressive policy of public acquisition of derelict and underutilized industrial lands along the Maumee River corridor. Sixty acres of railroad yards across from the downtown became International Park, while another 30+ acre railroad marshalling yard in the “Middlegrounds” just southeast of the downtown was purchased and land banked for a more compatible residential/recreational use. One hundred ten acres were acquired next to Riverside Park, four miles north of the downtown, near Maumee Bay. This provided Toledo with ownership of 200 acres of potential riverfront park land, an impressive figure given the competition for control of these lands with commercial and industrial interests. Equally significant in Toledo’s waterfront development was that, through urban renewal, Toledo owned ten acres of prime riverfront property right at the doorstep of downtown Toledo.

With control of over 210 riverfront acres, the City was poised to implement the Toledo Looks To The River revitalization plan. The Toledo City Council adopted a Maumee Riverfront Overlay Zoning District (MR-O) to require review of development along the waterfront. One vital component was still missing. As of 1974, not one downtown corporate headquarters building was located along the Maumee River. In fact, downtown’s largest employer, Owens-Illinois, was in the process of acquiring for redevelopment the remainder of the block surrounding it’s 28-story art-deco 1929 headquarters, fully four blocks from the river.

In 1975, as downtown Toledo continued to lose its retail and corporate base, Mayor Harry Kessler formed
the Greater Toledo Corporation, a citizen-corporate committee assigned the task of revitalizing downtown. Toledo Trust, the largest bank in Toledo, along with glass products giant Owens-Illinois and the Toledo Blade newspaper, worked with Mayor Kessler to develop a revised downtown master plan. This plan assigned roles to the financial and corporate interests involved, with a commitment to take full advantage of the Maumee Riverfront.

Thus, in 1977 the Downtown Toledo Master Plan was created. This time the Downtown Distributor was gone. In its place were eight-acre public parks, fountains, office buildings, a hotel, and a grand boulevard stretching five blocks into the core of downtown and serving as a link to the Civic Center (government campus) and Courthouse Square. One year later, Owens-Illinois, which had been flirting with moving to the suburbs, committed to build their new headquarters on the waterfront. Along with Toledo Trust, Owens-Illinois agreed to undertake the revitalization of the entire 10-acre parcel of public land, with an emphasis on the critical waterfront elements in the adopted Master Plan. The two principals, Toledo Trust and Owens-Illinois, were represented by their respective Chief Executive Officers, George Haigh and Ed Dodd. Haigh and Dodd set out to create a new image for Toledo by developing a world-class waterfront and corporate campus environment. The firms worked with the City government and major downtown corporations and banks to assemble a development package, nicknamed the “Toledo Trick.” This package employed Urban Development Action Grants, private capital, union pension funds and tax increment financing.

Called “SeaGate,” the project initially included a 1,100-space parking garage across Summit Street, the 32-story Owens-Illinois world headquarters, a five-story Toledo Trust headquarters, and plans for a 14-story hotel. Nestled up against these towers was a new eight-acre Promenade Park, designed by Sasaki and Associates, that encompassed all of the downtown Maumee Riverfront. In addition, Jackson Street was converted into Jackson Boulevard, a classic grand avenue with a heavily landscaped 60-foot-wide median. Meanwhile, the State of Ohio made a commitment to build a 22-story Government Center at the Civic Center end of the boulevard-SeaGate began to take off.

With the assistance of another dose of federal funds in 1982, ground was broken for SeaGate (a twin-tower 10-story office building built on speculation), the Hotel Sofitel and, new to the plans, the first “festival marketplace” outside of the east coast. “Portside” as it was called, would be a 60,000-square foot center, blending retailing and entertainment, following the model that had succeeded so well in Boston and Baltimore. Designed by Morton Hoppendale and developed by urban guru James Rouse, Portside was the latest and most ambitious product of this winning team, though their smallest to date. Portside was given a “keystone” location in the very heart of the emerging riverfront. A first-class high-rise convention hotel was attached to the north wall of the building, additionally, the marketplace was located at a vital crossroads in the downtown Toledo’s enclosed pedestrian walkway network. While Portside was under construction, plans were announced for a new convention center and hotel four blocks south of the site. Things looked like they were coming together for Toledo’s waterfront and Portside.

Portside Opens

Portside opened in 1984 with a celebration that included the Governor of Ohio and a live remote broadcast of NBC’s Today Show with Willard Scott. Almost from the beginning, however, Portside was beset with problems. Other portions of the SeaGate development, crucial to Portside’s retail strategy, were delayed in opening by over two years. Rather than increasing as projected, downtown employment decreased after Portside’s opening. Problems with the retail tenant mix, the size of the building, inconvenient parking and the absence of other downtown retail and entertainment attractions, kept Portside from becoming a retail destination. Finally, the cost of heating the under-used building proved too expensive.
Shunning most franchises, Rouse sought to evoke a Toledo "flavor" by bringing established local bakeries and shops as well as first-time local small business operators into Portside. Although the marketplace initially showed signs of vitality, sales and visitors soon fell short of expectations. Management changed several times over the next six years in an attempt to keep the facility with its novice merchant mix afloat. Further hampering the marketplace's viability, the long-anticipated convention center, the $100 million SeaGate Centre and Radisson Hotel, did not open until late 1986, fully 30 months after Portside. Because the SeaGate Centre was Toledo's first convention complex, the city had to effectively start from scratch to establish itself as a convention destination. The SeaGate Centre had rather limited use in its first few years of operation because conventions are booked so far in advance.

While Portside and the SeaGate Centre needed each other, they needed the corporations even more. Toledo's corporations were devastated by the hostile takeovers of the late 1980s. In 1978, when the SeaGate project was first conceived, Toledo was home to seven Fortune 500 corporations and three regional banks. Today there are only three Fortune 500 corporations and no major banks headquartered in Toledo—all others have been acquired by interests located outside Toledo. Owens-Illinois was purchased by KKR of New York in 1988; Toledo Trust was taken over by Society Bank of Cleveland in 1990. Additionally, Owens-Corning Fiberglas retained local ownership only after fighting off a hostile takeover by Wickes of California. Unfortunately, for Owens-Corning Fiberglas to survive, it had to cut its downtown work force by 600. Likewise, Owens-Illinois' downtown employment fell from nearly 2,000 in 1977 to approximately 700 in 1990. These changes in the fabric of the downtown economy had a profound impact on Portside. Instead of the modest growth projected in 1977, downtown Toledo's employment base was actually shrinking. The downtown that had lost relevance as a retail center was now in danger of losing its office role as well.

In addition to the loss of a customer base with corporate downsizing, Portside also suffered from being out of step with local consumer demands. Toledans enjoy bargain hunting and are accustomed to parking that is visible, safe, close, and free. Parking at Portside cost money, was difficult to find, and was not in view of the shopping complex. Also, without familiar franchised outlets, Portside's shops lacked the name recognition necessary to draw Toledans downtown.

Portside developers had projected that 5,000,000 visitors per year and sales of $200 to $300 a square foot, with profits going to inner-city revitalization projects. Actual visitor counts were closer to half that number. There were no profits to share. In fact, as of 1991, none of the debt service on the $14,000,000 construction cost had been reduced. Further, Toledo's consumers had long abandoned the downtown in favor of regional shopping centers and retail strips. No department store has existed in downtown Toledo since 1983, when the largely downsized Macy's finally closed its doors.

Portside also lacked a sense of purpose or place. Its relatively small size and odd tenant mix did much to confuse and disappoint visitors. The selection of shops revealed an inconsistent mix, not quite a fashion mall or an exclusive retail center. At one point its lower level retail section consisted of one shoe store, a candle shop, a stuffed animal store, an outlet for local artists, a retailer of sunglasses and a Benetton. Upstairs included myriad fast food booths, a store where everything was purple and a kite shop. Portside was too small, its selection too limited and its prices too high for it to compete as a retail destination.

Without other downtown attractions, there was little reason for the tourist or visitor to return to Portside or, for that matter, Toledo. Tour busses continued to jettison unsuspecting elderly groups from Indiana, Michigan, southern Ohio, and Canada only to have them return dismayed at all the hype. The marketplace was nearly
packed at lunch time, as downtown workers convened around the upper-level food court overlooking the river. In the evening it was a quiet and eerie place to visit.

Portside, with its open framework design, tall ceilings, sky lights, and glass walls required a lot of energy just to stay heated and cooled. The City could not afford to keep the now nearly empty marketplace heated. The Mayor made a decision to close Portside as the winter of 1990-91 approached. At the end eleven merchants, mostly consisting of fast food retailers and confectioners, fought to stay.

Portside Today

Architecturally, Portside may be one of the most attractive festival marketplaces built. Mr. Hoppenfeld, working with the Toledo architectural firm The Collaborative, created a light and airy gossamer jewel on the waterfront. The proportions, colors and details fit comfortably with the surroundings. Unfortunately, Portside had the power to attract without the substance to retain. Like Gertrude Stein’s comment about Oakland, “there is no there there.”

Things may be looking up for Portside. The future of this building has been the subject of a great deal of public debate. Ideas range from demolition to grain storage, but one idea seems to have taken root. The Center Of Science and Industry (COSI), in Columbus, Ohio has taken an interest in Portside and the neighboring Water Street Station, a former steam generating plant designed by Daniel Burnham. Under the guidance of Society Bank and funding assistance from local investors and the State, Portside and the Water Street Station are expected to be reanimated as COSI Toledo, a $20,000,000 hands-on science museum and discovery center. What was once Portside would contain travelling and permanent exhibits, theaters, and a waterfront restaurant. The former Water Street Station would also house science exhibits, focused on the industrial heritage and future of Toledo.

As of this writing, fundraising at both the local and State level was reported to be ahead of schedule. COSI Toledo, as envisioned, would be only a small component of an overall Arts and Sciences corridor on Adams Street. The corridor would include a restored historic Valentine Theater for the Performing Arts, new retail activity in the shopping concourse of the recently-completed Summit Center office tower, and the School for the Performing and Visual Arts in the former Macy’s.

The COSI project, along with the other elements of the “Arts and Sciences Corridor,” the Valentine, and the Art School, will depend on the patronage of the residents of Toledo and Northwest Ohio, and not tourists and conventioners. The corridor will constitute a complete destination. Toledoans have a long tradition of fostering and supporting family-oriented programs and institutions, such as the Toledo Zoo, Metropolitan Parks, and Museum of Art. The COSI project, and its companions, would be built upon a clear sense of what Toledo is and not on what Toledo could be. COSI has a much greater chance of success because it will be oriented to the majority of Toledoans and the family-oriented Toledo social foundation.

Once again, the elements of revitalization seem to be coming together in Toledo. The emphasis on the waterfront that began with Toledo Looks To The River continues today. A new strategic plan called Toledo Vision has been approved. A new non-profit downtown advocacy group has been formed to see COSI Toledo, the Valentine, and other elements of the plan realized. With a little luck, a solid financial base, and the anticipated support of the average Toledoan, the winds that chill the Portside Building will someday be replaced with the warmth, laughter and joy of children. CR